The Crowning of Alice

A Roll the DICE! Mini Zine

Roll the DICE!
an unofficial Danganronpa fanzine

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Summary.

"Don't forget who you are."

Those are the Red Queen's parting words to the boy who calls himself Alice. Having just woken up here, Alice doesn't know much about Wonderland, but he understands this: he must play the Queen's game of chess if he's ever to leave this place.

Lost in Wonderland, Alice has no choice but to play according to the Queen's rules. To win, he'll have to defeat all Wonderland residents in order to reach the other side of the board.

Only then, when Alice is crowned as queen, can he defy the Red Queen's reign.

WARNINGS: Drowning (Ch. 6), Light injury (Ch. 9, Ch. 10), Blood (Ch. 9), Angst, No happy ending.

Credits.

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1

Chess Rules

KOKICHI WOKE UP to a horn blaring right next to his ear and his heart pounding in fear. He looked around wildly, and found himself surrounded by strange faces—with the exception of one: the boy bearing a crown on his head looking at him with an air of superiority on his face, which mirrored Kokichi's own features. Lost, he blinked owlishly at the unexpected company. Beside him, still holding a horn, a girl with rabbit ears took in a deep breath.

"The Red Queen is here to warrant an official invitation to the outlander!" The White Rabbit announced loudly, at the top of her lungs.

Kokichi rubbed at his left ear and shot the girl a dirty look.

"An invitation?" He mumbled. "To what?"

His doppleganger—the Red Queen, he presumed—leaned into his space. Rudely, he knocked on Kokichi's forehead as if testing if there was something inside.

"Seems you have your senses back, that's good." The Queen put a hand on his hips and smiled. "I was beginning to think you might sleep the entire match away, and then I would've won by default. Isn't that the most boring result possible?"

He turned to his guard, silently standing behind the Queen with a vacant look in his eyes, as if the conversation couldn't matter less to him. Upon being addressed, the guard nodded, and did little else. Baffled, Kokichi searched for the White Rabbit, intending to ask her if that was normal for the two of them. The White Rabbit, however, was nowhere to be found.

He could only rely on the Red Queen for answers, but no further explanation came forth even after a long minute of staring at each other. Still disoriented from seeing his own face on someone else, Kokichi looked away.

"What kind of match are we talking about?" He asked hesitantly. "I'm not sure I understand what's going on…"

"Oh, I suppose I didn't make proper introductions."

The Red Queen lowered himself into a bow with a hand to his chest. "I am the supreme ruler of Wonderland." He straightened up and opened his arms in a grandiose gesture. "Therefore, everything in this world belongs to me, including you."

Frowning, Kokichi interjected, "You can't *own* someone."

"But I can!" He laughed. Noticing Kokichi's lack of humor, the Queen raised his cane and pointed it at Kokichi. "If you dislike that so much, you'll have to win against me. Then, you're free to

do as you wish; escape Wonderland or rule over it, that's all up to you. Though…"

The Queen appraised him, disdain clear in his eyes as he cocked his head and arched his eyebrows.

"That's only if you can even make it to my castle, of course."

Kokichi shuffled awkwardly on his seat. The Queen stared expectantly at him, and finally, he dared to raise his hand.

"Excuse me, but," Kokichi cleared his throat, "what game *are* we playing?"

The Red Queen was perplexed. He stayed still for a beat, as if waiting for the punchline, but when it didn't come, he laughed all the same. The Queen pointed an accusing finger at him while wiping tears from his eyes.

"You don't even know that much!" He said in between wheezing breaths. "You are so doomed, I can just tell!"

Kokichi narrowed his eyes and clenched his hands into fists. He opened his mouth to answer, but in that moment, he felt the guard's eyes on him, boring into him as if he could just *tell* what Kokichi was thinking. He swallowed his original response and mustered his most polite smile.

"If you could answer my question, I'd really appreciate it."

"We're playing chess, my most incompetent opponent."

Kokichi wasn't particularly good at chess; he knew the basic rules of it, but that was the limit of his knowledge. He sighed, but when he heard the Queen's snicker, he quickly composed himself and held his head high.

"I can defeat you. I'll do it."

As if his reign hadn't just been threatened, the Queen smiled and clapped.

"That's how you ought to think! I can't have you losing your fighting spirit so early. Now, then…"

The Queen patted his clothes down and clasped his hands behind his back. He leaned back a bit and whispered something inaudible to his guard, who shook his head "no".

"I see," the Queen whispered. Then, he turned his attention back to Kokichi. "If I'm going to fight you, then I demand to know your name."

Kokichi looked from the guard to the Queen, then finally to the hem of his own dark clothes. He played with the ruffles of his sleeves as he thought it over for longer than was strictly necessary when faced with such a simple question. Finally, he raised his eyes.

"Alice," he announced. "My name's Alice."

The Red Queen smirked privately, as if laughing at a joke only he knew of.

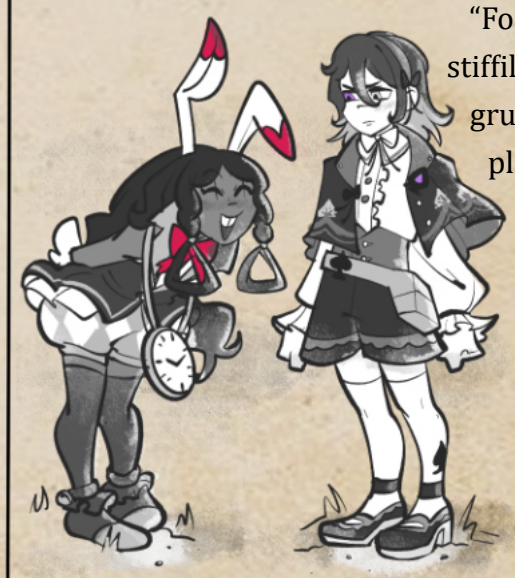
"I see, I'll be waiting for you, *Alice*." He turned on his heels.

“Do try your very best, and never forget who you are. I expect great things from you.”

The Queen left with a wink thrown over his shoulder. There was too much he didn’t yet understand, so Alice jumped up from his seat to demand answers, but he was stopped from taking a single step as the card soldier held him at the edge of his sword. Alice went cross-eyed as he stared nervously down at the blade. Thankfully, the Queen’s faithful guard stepped back once he saw Alice had no intention of moving again.

“I have a few questions,” Alice tried to catch his attention, but the card soldier barely spared him a glance. “You, wait a moment—”

The guard left without a word, leaving Alice in the dust.



“For someone who’s marching stiffilly, he sure walks fast,” he grumbled under his breath. Alice plopped back down with a fist to his cheek. “What now?”

“Don’t worry about that guard, he’s always like that,” the White Rabbit commented helpfully.

Alice nodded absentmindedly, only to snap his head to the side a moment later. He gaped at the White Rabbit.

“I thought you were gone!”

“But now I’m not,” she giggled. “Because I’m your guide.”

“My guide?”

She nodded her head, and her ears bobbed with her enthusiasm.

“I’m sure you have questions, right?”

“Yes, actually—”

“Which is why!” The White Rabbit paused to look at her watch, hanging across her chest like a purse. She gasped and pressed closer to Alice, rubbing her forehead painfully against his. “No time to lose!” The White Rabbit stabbed a finger at his chest. “You’ll be late for the match!”

What was with this place and rudely pointing at others?

“I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do—”

“I’m going to explain right now, don’t you worry. You’ll understand everything by the end, I promise.” She pulled his ear and looked inside inquisitively. “You better make sure your ears are clean and working, because I won’t repeat any of it. Got it? Got it!”

Alice tried to interject, but in the mere second it took him to open his mouth, the White Rabbit had already barrelled on, speaking faster than he ever could.

"We call it chess, but it's a bit different. Your objective is to capture the Queen, so he's like the king piece, but he's the Queen. He's kinda both." The White Rabbit scratched her chin. "That's just a title anyways so it doesn't matter too much, all

you need to know is that you have to defeat the Red Queen. Except! Only a queen could defeat a queen. King. Whatever. You get what I mean, right?"

"I think so—"

"Excellent! Right now you're just a pawn, so you need to make it aaaaall the way across the board, be crowned as a queen, then confront *the* Queen. 'There can only be one of us' style." She stared blankly into space for a moment while tapping her chin. "What else is there…"

"Maybe you could tell me where the board is?" Alice suggested. "I can't play otherwise."

"No, no, it's not that! Wonderland itself is the board, that much is obvious, I don't need to explain *that*."

Alice laughed in self-pity, and decided not to oppose that statement. The White Rabbit, however, noticed his plight and patted his shoulder in solidarity.

"Your brain seems to be quite small, I understand," she said sympathetically. "I don't have anything inside my head either, so I'm sure we'll get along greatly."

Alice discreetly shuffled away from her touch. "I see."

"Since you're still kinda ignorant, naive and inexperienced, it's my duty as your guide to help you."

The weather sure is nice today, Alice thought to himself forcefully and with emphasis as his temple started to throb.

"You see, this is the very beginning of the board," the White Rabbit explained, "and the Queen's castle is the last square. To

make it to her, you'll have to traverse Wonderland. Ah, but you'll have to defeat the other pieces if you want to move."

"And if I fail to defeat them?"

"The gates will remain closed and you'll be unable to move forever. You're free to find out what happens after that!"

Alice suppressed a shudder.

"I suppose I have no choice but to win."

"Quite right! Does it all make sense now?"

"I must move to the next square, defeat the other pieces, and make my way to the Queen, where I can confront him to escape this place." He counted each item on his fingers. Once he was done, Alice nodded to himself. "That's the gist of it."

"Yes, yes, you got it just right!"

The White Rabbit clapped hard enough to make her palms sting—they were bright red when she grabbed Alice's wrist and pulled him out of his seat.

"Now that you understand, it's time to move out!"

"Wait, wait, I'm not ready yet!"

Alice planted his feet on the ground and tried to yank his arm free, but the White Rabbit was surprisingly strong, and she dragged him without breaking a sweat.

"You won't know you're ready until you give it a try," she advised.

"I suppose that's true, but—"

The White Rabbit shoved him through an enormous gate, and as he fell on his face onto the other side, it closed behind

him. Alice twisted around to look at the White Rabbit through the bars.

"Good luck, Alice!"

And with that, she was gone.

2

Afternoon Tea

ALICE ADJUSTED HIS CLOTHES and winced at a small scratch on his cheek. Discreetly, he looked left and right, and certified that no one had seen him fall in such a graceless way—even if it wasn't his fault he had been pushed, it was still a little embarrassing. Alice sighed, relieved that he had no company to laugh at his unkempt state, but the sentiment washed away as he remembered he had not a single clue where to go next.

He kept scanning the area until he noticed a convenient sign pointing him over the wooden bridge that led into the forest. Although Alice was careful to check where, exactly, he was being led, it did very little to help: the sign had nothing written on it. Still, it was a direction to follow, so Alice threw aside his hesitation and followed the path it presented to him.

It became clear very quickly, however, that the placement of any signs was very nonsensical. As he advanced, their numbers

increased, and the instructions contradicted each other. Many times he was led one way, only to be told to go the opposite direction. Eventually, the signs were kind enough to tell him "to the March Hare's house", but that information was overshadowed by the fact that the arrow pointed everywhere, *including* up and down.

"What kind of absurd layout is this?!" Alice yelled as he grew tired of walking in circles.

The scream worked in burning out his anger, but in reaction, the birds perched on the trees sang back, loud enough to be a cry of their own. He covered his ears to block out the cacophony, though it didn't help all that much.

"Young master, young master!" A boy called, louder than the birds. His voice was strong, like someone used to making their voice carry.

Alice looked up, and he was quickly distracted by the bright red of the boy's hair. In a moment of confusion, he looked back over his shoulder, but found no one else there. Alice pointed a finger at himself and inclined his head, and the boy nodded with enthusiasm. As soon as he was within earshot, Alice hurried to protest, "I'm not a young master."

"Then what are you?"

"Just… Alice."

The boy put his hands on his hips. "Well, then, Just Alice." He moved with a flourish, bowing while he wagged his finger and tutted rhythmically. "You're a very impolite young man, do you

know? All your shouting interrupted my performance. How could one possibly amaze the audience with all this *noise?"*

"Oh, I'm sorry," he apologized on instinct. Alice shook his head. "That's not what I wanted to say! Are you the piece on this square?"

"Why, of course!" He removed his strange hat from atop his head, and when he tipped it, several cards fell in cascades. "The Mad Hatter, at your service."

"Isn't naming yourself 'mad' a little…" Alice watched the Mad Hatter gasp when a grape fell from his tophat. He hurried to pick the lone grape up from the ground, then cleaned it with the lapels of his jacket with great care until it shone. Satisfied, the Mad Hatter stuffed the grape back into his hat. "Nevermind."

"Now that we're acquainted, I'm sure you can follow my instructions and stay quiet, as any good audience should be." He held a hand to his chest, said, "Unless it is to applaud me at the end," and winked at Alice.

"I've never heard of a hatter who is also a performer," Alice mused. "But I suppose it isn't the strangest combination I've seen."

"Excuse me, Just Alice, but I have a performance to attend to, and delays are inexcusable."

"That's not my n—"

"You see," the Mad Hatter booped the tip of Alice's nose, "I'm the star of the show. That's why I need to be there. Do you

understand?"

"Yes, of course—"

"Then let us depart!"

Much like the Red Queen and the White Rabbit, the Mad Hatter was rather unwilling to wait, so Alice had to hurry his steps to catch up. He stuck closely to the Mad Hatter, afraid that even a centimeter of distance would cause him to be lost again. His companion, on the other, was quite unconcerned: the Mad Hatter read the signs as if they made great sense, humming as he chose his path without a hint of hesitation. Alice was almost envious of it—but then decided it wouldn't be a good thing to get too used to this place.

He planned on leaving soon, after all.

Soon, the Mad Hatter had led them into a garden, covered by tall, blooming plants that enveloped the place in a delicate, flowery scent. Alice couldn't identify all the flowers even if he tried, but he didn't get the chance to try, because the Mad Hatter hurried to climb on top of the long table at the center of the garden. Alice winced when a saucer cracked under his foot, but the Mad Hatter seemed undeterred.

"My dear audience, I have made it just in the nick of time!" He announced.

The two attendants, a mysterious boy wearing a mask and another sleeping face first on the table, applauded. The first one, who Alice guessed to be the March Hare, scoffed and pulled out a pocket watch.

"According to *my* time, you're late."

The Mad Hatter, in turn, took an enormous clock out of his hat. Alice was not sure how it even fit in there.

"But according to my time, I am two minutes early!"

Alice shuffled forward to peek at their watches. They were both frozen and most likely broken.

"A good performer should be at least five minutes early on everyone's time," the March Hare admonished. "Anyone who is not an inexperienced beginner or a fool should know as much."

The Mad Hatter laughed heartily, doubling over and wiping invisible tears from his eyes. "What a tough crowd I have today!" He crouched in front of the March Hare and handed him a rose, as well as a teacup filled with sugar cubes but no tea. "Please, do accept my apologies for my tardiness."

The rose was thrown aside, but as for the teacup, the March Hare took it in a very posh grip (he even had his pinky raised) and, finding a small spoon, he stirred the sugar cubes around. He took a sip of, well, *nothing* and nodded.

"Apologies accepted."

In the commotion, Alice found a seat for himself. If he was going to spend his time wondering what to do next, he might as well do it sitting. From beside him, the rather miniscule boy suddenly sprung up.

"Even a good performer is late sometimes," he wisely added.

"Aren't you a little late for that..?"

"No conversation is ever truly over."

"I see."

The March Hare shot them a dirty look—it was hard to tell with the mask in the way, but Alice was sure he was glaring. He straightened up and turned his attention to the Mad Hatter. Whatever his performance was about, however, it made little sense to him and Alice found his focus wavering.

"I don't think we've been introduced," he whispered to his seatmate.

"You'd be right." The little man blinked slowly, and almost fell asleep when he suddenly added, "I'm the Dormouse."

"It's nice to meet you, my name's Alice."

The Dormouse nodded. An awkward atmosphere set around them and Alice shifted uncomfortably on his chair. The Dormouse wasn't inclined to pick up the conversation, so the responsibility of doing as much fell on Alice. He took a deep breath.

"Do you, uhm, like this show?"

The Dormouse thought for a moment, hand at the chin.

"I have no interest in this conversation," he declared, and then fell back down on his face.

"Now listen here!"

A loud snore was his only answer. Alice fumed, arms crossed but resisting the urge to stomp his feet. Everyone here was so unbelievably rude!

He resolutely looked at the Mad Hatter again.

"What kind of streets do ghosts haunt?" The Mad Hatter asked, looking expectantly at the March Hare while balancing a dangerously high pile of plates on one hand.

Surprised to be prompted like that, the March Hare looked up from his nails and stared silently. After a moment, he shook his head. The Mad Hatter beamed.

"Dead ends!"

The March Hare didn't twitch. The silence stretched for a long, long minute. Then, he clapped. It was such a weak, sorry excuse of an applause, it was a little sad to watch. While Alice felt like disappearing from the secondhand embarrassment, the Mad Hatter acted as if he had just received the highest praise. He bowed deeply at the waist, and all the plates came crashing down, one after the other. Alice startled away, afraid he might get hurt from the flying fragments of porcelain. Immediately, the other two whipped their heads towards him.

"Shhhhh!" The March Hare shushed, irritated.

"I must once again ask that the audience remain quiet," the Mad Hatter said.

A third voice added, "It's because you make such mundane

questions that you're so boring."

Alice glared at the dormouse. "Don't wake up just to call me boring! And that conversation is long dead!"

Since his chair had become a hazard with all the tiny bits of porcelain, Alice left his seat and found another one at the edge of the table. He raised his hand and cleared his throat, waiting to be acknowledged.

"Yes, Just Alice?" The Mad Hatter asked tiredly.

"Aren't we supposed to be playing chess?" Alice fiddled with his sleeves. "Or whatever version of chess the Red Queen wants us to play. I thought we were all here because of that…"

It was a good thing he looked up as he trailed off, as that gave him the chance to jump away when a piece of cake flew right towards his face. He stared at the March Hare, who was now contemplating the cake as if he had no involvement in almost hitting Alice.

The Mad Hatter, nonplussed, crouched in front of Alice.

"If you're always worrying about something, it'll ruin your pretty face," he advised. "That's why I never concern myself with anything!"

With that, he was off to continue his performance. Alice sunk into his fist as he watched the Mad Hatter try to stuff the entirety of the Dormouse's head into the spout of the teapot he was holding.

"I'm supposed to defeat them, but where do I even start…" He muttered.

"Mumbling to oneself when in the presence of others is quite rude," the March Hare interjected.

Miffed, Alice tutted. "The way you speak is demanding and sharp, no matter what you're talking about. You're pretty bold if you can call out someone for being rude."

"Oh no," the Mad Hatter whispered.

"What? Is he going to get angry?" Alice crossed his arms. "I'm not exactly afraid of him."

The March Hare, however, was eerily silent. Alice wondered if he was the type for quiet fury, or if he would suddenly explode, much like a volcano. Maybe this was the calm before the storm. Alice braced himself.

Then, he heard a hiccup. The March Hare lowered his head, shoulders shaking. It took a moment to register, but once Alice tilted his head for a better angle, he could see the tears streaming down his chin from under the mask.

"Oh my god." Alice found a bundle of napkins and shoved it into the March Hare's hand. "I'm so sorry, I didn't really mean that. Well, I kinda did, but…"

The March Hare sniffled.

"He's a very sensitive one," the Mad Hatter sighed. "He can't take any sort of criticism."

"Even though he acts *like that* all the time?" Alice asked, eyebrows raised.

"I can tell you're quite the hypocrite, little boy," the Dormouse quipped from inside the teapot.

"I'm beginning to think you don't like me very much."

The three mopped on their own: the March Hare was still crying, the Mad Hatter was grumbling about having his performance interrupted, and the Dormouse was saying nonsense in his sleep. In short, it was a mess, and Alice was no closer to knowing how to progress to the next square.

He needed to think of something, and fast.

"Why don't we all play a game?" Alice suggested, smiling. "I think that would cheer us up!"

"There's no glamour in that," the Mad Hatter protested.

"I want nothing to do with you," the March Hare said through a sob.

"No," the Dormouse refused.

Alice slumped. "Nevermind."

3

Afterparty

"I *'M GOING FOR A WALK*," Alice announced.

He didn't want to give the others the chance to reply with yet another jab at him, so Alice removed himself before they could open their big mouths. He followed the trail of flowers to the front of a quaint little house, which had been hidden before by all the plants and trees. Seeing as there was a swing set not too far from there, Alice took the liberty of sitting on one of them.

"What now?"

He heard a giggle and looked towards it. A girl with a toothy grin waved, did a twirl and promptly disappeared into thin air. Alice didn't even get the chance to say a simple "hi".

"Don't worry, Cheshire always appears when it's convenient to her," the White Rabbit reassured. "I'm sure you'll meet her again soon enough."

At this point, Alice was no longer startled. He followed the

White Rabbit's path as she swung back and forth with her whole body, standing on the swing rather than sitting.

"I'm pretty sure I could say the same about you."

"I suppose you could!"

The swing squeaked as the White Rabbit played with it. Alice gave the chain a dubious look.

"You're here to help me, aren't you?" He said, sufficiently stealing the girl's attention. She slowed to a stop, and Alice held a hand to his chest, relieved. At least then she wouldn't be flung to her death or something similar.

"How did you know?"

"You said you're my guide, so it only made sense."

The White Rabbit balanced precariously on one leg to pat him on the head. "Yes, that's what I am!"

"So?"

"So!"

She blinked at him, eyes wide and expectant. Alice grimaced and nudged her head to the side so he wouldn't have to face that stare.

"You're supposed to tell me what to do next."

"Oh! You're right!"

The chains rattled noisily when the White Rabbit jumped off the swing. She landed on her feet with a proud grin, but when Alice didn't react, she pouted and started rummaging through her bag with ferocity.

"I'm sure you'll like *this* one," she whispered fervently. "Ta-dah!"

She presented a flask to Alice with a triumphant flourish. The label happily said "drink me ♥" which only served the purpose of making it more suspicious than any bottle had the right to be. Alice refused to take it, even after the White Rabbit shoved it into his hands.

"Let me explain something first." She rummaged some more and found a bundle of papers. She squinted at the letters as she cleared her throat. "To win against a piece, you must steal their name. Any methods employed to do so are permitted. A win is a win, no matter how dirty."

That had the Red Queen written all over it. Alice couldn't help but wonder what that last part entailed about the nature of this game, and what would happen to him if he lost. For now, however, he could only focus on what was right in front of him.

"How do I steal something that isn't tangible?"

"Oh, but a name *is* tangible. You could even hold it in your hands."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Because it's written somewhere, silly!" The White Rabbit flicked his forehead. "You need to be smarter than this if you want to win. Find their name and you win."

"How?"

Instead of replying, the White Rabbit fumbled with his clothing, checking the lapels, the hems, even tugging at his

shirt. Alice slapped her hand away, but she was quick to return. She brightened when she peeked at the backside of the brooch on his chest. Alice took a look himself, and saw the first kanji of his name.

"It should be on them somewhere," the White Rabbit explained. "You'll know when you see it."

Alice nodded, albeit uncertainly. He turned his body away, keeping the brooch from the White Rabbit's grip. Once he was sure she wouldn't make another move, he reached for the flask the White Rabbit had offered before and held it to the light. It didn't look like anything special.

"And this?"

"Something to help them all take a nice and long nap!"

Alice sniffed at it. "Is this even legal?"

"Anything is permitted if the Queen says as much."

So this, too, was a result of his interference. He held the flask tighter.

"How am I even supposed to give this to them? 'Hello, everyone, would you care for a sip of a very suspicious liquid?'"

"Why don't you try lying? You're pretty good at that."

"I am?"

The White Rabbit smiled. She seemed confident of her assessment, although Alice had never been one to lie all that much. The best he could do was put on a smile and swallow his frustrations, and he intended to tell her as much, but something in the White Rabbit's eyes stilled his tongue.

"...Alright, I'll give it a try," Alice told her. "Thank you for the help."

"Bye bye, Alice!"

He walked back around the house to the garden, and was lucky to find all the pieces were still in place. The Mad Hatter was monologuing to himself, with his audience of two sometimes interjecting. When Alice approached, they all stared at him. He felt the back of his neck burn.

"I'm sorry for leaving so suddenly. Oh, and for ruining the show."

Think, Alice, think. At this rate, he'd be here forever. Although he was never given a time limit, he felt the minutes ticking away. A sense of urgency tugged at his stomach. He had to hurry. Alice clenched his fists.

"I caused you a lot of trouble, so I brought an apology gift."

Immediately, the others perked up. The Dormouse fought against the teapot to lift it from his head and look at him. In that one split second, all of Alice's muscles loosened. He felt strangely at ease here.

"What is this gift you speak of?" The March Hare prompted.

"We haven't had tea yet, so I thought you'd appreciate a nice drink so we can all relax." He showed them the flask. "This is supposed to make any tea taste better, it's a sort of enhancer for the flavor."

"As the star of the show, clearly I should get to taste it first," the Mad Hatter immediately said.

"The obvious choice here would be me," the March Hare protested.

The Dormouse, already asleep again, lifted a hand and snored loudly.

Alice chuckled and smiled at them kindly. "Don't worry, you can all have it."

The trio circled around him as Alice found the teapot and set on pouring three cups for them. On each cup, he dropped three drops of the liquid. His hands trembled a little, but thankfully none of them saw Alice's behavior as strange.

"Here you go."

Within a minute, they had downed their drink, barely breathing as they did it. The collective sound of their bodies hitting the table made Alice jump out of his skin. Counting the seconds in his head, he composed himself and held his breath as he waited. Carefully, Alice poked the Mad Hatter's cheek. Not a single twitch.

"Did I do it..?"

He was hesitant to approach them, but Alice snapped out of it, reminding himself he needed to find their name before they woke up if he wanted to win.

Within the Mad Hatter's hat, there was an ace of spades with a name written along the edges: Daichi Kubo.

For the March Hare, it was on the inside of his broken pocket watch: Reo Shirogane.

The Dormouse, unlike his companions, was an easy one to

find. The thing that caught his eyes was a golden pin on his breast pocket. It seemed like some sort of emblem, a double diamond with a crying face inside. Alice touched its corners and wondered where he had seen it before. On the back, engraved in such small letters he had to squint to read it, there was the last name: Youta Hyodo.

"I'll be having these now," Alice told them apologetically.

It was meaningless to feel guilty now, especially after he had been in such a hurry to move forward, but Alice lingered. He drummed his fingers on the table as he waited for the effects of the drug to wear off. Once they were awake, he could take responsibility for deceiving them all.

The seconds ticked by slowly. Alice watched the sun move across the sky until blue was replaced by orange. Unease twisted his stomach in knots. He checked their pulses a number of times but although their hearts were beating, they didn't move.

Why weren't they awake yet?

I need to find the White Rabbit, Alice thought frantically. The Rabbit, being his guide, was sure to show herself again now that he was in need of her. Alice needed to believe as much. He swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth and left his seat. As much as he hated to admit it, dawdling here wouldn't help any of them. For now, the best he could do was to reach the next square; he could think of how to fix this once he found the White Rabbit.

4

An Encounter with a Cat

THE GATE LOOMED OVER HIM, imposing as always. Alice couldn't look back as he passed through the threshold. Without delay, the gates closed behind him. His heart beat wildly at his throat as he stared back the way he came, now closed behind him. He pressed a hand to his mouth.

"White Rabbit!" Alice shouted. "I need your help! Please!"

His voice echoed throughout the woods. He waited for long seconds, but still nothing happened. Alice continued to yell until the whole thing started feeling pointless. Alice crumpled to his knees, finding it hard to breathe.

"Did I do the right thing?"

"There's no right and wrong, only winning or losing," a girl's voice said. "You should know that much if you're here."

Alice looked up at the Cheshire Cat, perched on top of the gates, and smiled. Relief washed over him.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, little Alice."

With her unsettling half mask and the condescending smirk, the Cheshire Cat was far from being the most reassuring figure, but Alice was grateful all the same. Given the timing of her appearance, he felt it safe to assume his help had finally arrived.

"It's good to meet you as well," Alice said. He folded his hands neatly into each other and did a small bow. "Sorry to cut to the chase, but I need your help. It's somewhat of an emergency."

The Cheshire Cat watched him with what he could only presume was amusement. She cocked her head and muffled a giggle behind her hand.

"I commend you for your politeness, but I must refuse," she replied.

Perplexed, Alice frowned. "Why?"

"Pardon me," she said, not sounding sorry at all, "but I only accept requests from the Red Queen."

At the mention of the Queen, Alice felt goosebumps raise on his forearms. It was too early to draw conclusions, but it was strange he was once again mentioned at such a crucial time. Alice peeked at the Queen's castle, standing far in the distance.

"That doesn't seem fair," he argued weakly.

"Who told you this game was fair?"

"It's impossible to win a game if both sides aren't being fair."

The Cheshire Cat looked to the side as she held her laughter, not speaking a word on the subject. A chill fell over Alice's

mind, and he held onto himself tighter.

"I thought you were here to help me," Alice tried to explain.

If anything, that only served to make the Cheshire Cat laugh more.

"What could've possibly given you that impression?" She shot back, with the kind of arrogance that could only be seen in those who think too highly of themselves. "Perhaps you have me confused with that rabbit. Oh, what a shame. Only a few hours in Wonderland, and this one is already going mad."

Unease, that was the feeling that constricted his chest. Alice couldn't speak for a moment, and white noise filled his head. He just needed to keep up a nice attitude. It would be fine. He was used to this.

"I'm not mad, just… confused." Alice bit his lip and looked down at the ground. "I thought someone like you would have answers, I'm sorry I made assumptions."

Like sparks to tinder, her face lit up in interest. Her tail swishing, the Cheshire Cat leaned her chin onto her interlaced fingers. Her smile was wide, while Alice's was demure.

He knew this act like the back of his hand.

"If you could just tell me what happened with everyone at the tea party, that's all I really need to know," he reassured.

The Cheshire Cat considered his words for a moment, then raised her head imperiously. "I am capable of sharing as much, yes." She gauged Alice's reaction, and when she received an enthusiastic nod and his sole attention, her features softened

in satisfaction. "You haven't slayed them, if that is what you fear. They are simply in slumber."

"That's a relief…" Alice breathed out, hand to his chest. "I should go back and check on them, then."

Cheshire scoffed. Her expression was pinched, and the disdain cut Alice down to the core. The very sudden change in attitude gave him whiplash. Unaware of it, he had been treading a minefield, and just like that, a bomb had exploded.

"You're truly the fool of fools!" She cried, shock coloring her voice. "If you are to steal a person's existence, you should be prepared to accept the consequences of such an act."

"But I only stole their names!" He argued. The stolen accessories were a heavy weight inside his pouch.

"And aren't our existences ruled by our names? If you really wish to win this game, you have to grasp the true meaning of that." Cheshire leaned forward, a hand covering the side of the mouth as if she was about to tell him a secret. "But, between the two of us, I don't believe you are capable of that. Am I correct, little *Alice?*"

"I have no choice but to win," Alice reminded her. "So I will win."

"Empty words."

"I'm sure of it!" He yelled.

"You can't make your words more convincing just by shouting them," the Cheshire Cat admonished. She clicked her tongue. "You lack conviction."

She elegantly straightened up, and balanced herself atop the gate with the tips of her shoes.

"I am a generous person, so I shall leave you with this warning." Cheshire's smile was, for the first time, a simple one. A confident, small tilt at the corners of the mouth. "The Queen's will is much stronger than yours."

She didn't disappear fully, as her hand stayed so she could wave to Alice. After a moment, even that went away, and Alice was left with his racing thoughts.

Energy bubbled under his skin. He couldn't distinguish between the determination and the anger; it was the sort of nervousness that pushed him to move, now, *now*. He could win this. He *would* win this.

Alice stared up the gate and, after taking a deep breath, leaped at it. The metal dug into the pads of his fingers as he hung on for dear life. There was a long, long way up, but Alice closed his eyes and started climbing. He slipped quite a number of times, but he refused to back down now. He bit back the sting in his eyes and grabbed at the bars.

It was such a foolish thing, of that even Alice knew. This wouldn't prove a point, not one that mattered, not to anyone who cared. But now that he had started, he just wanted to make it back to the other. To find a way to wake up the pieces at the tea party.

Even if he knew there was nothing he could do.

Even if it'd change nothing.

His ankle bone collided with the metal. Alice cried out as his legs lost the strength to hold on. His arms couldn't compensate for the extra weight, and soon he was plummeting back down. Alice just barely managed to break his fall; his scratched palms and aching legs screamed at him. He blinked the stars in his vision, as well as the tears that insisted on falling.

To the sound of Cheshire's disembodied laugh, Alice set his head down on his knees and waited for the pain to pass.

5

Even if It Rains Knives

H*IS THOUGHTS WERE MISALIGNED.* There were voices coming from somewhere nearby, and for a moment Alice couldn't tell where he was. As he blinked himself awake, he realized he must have dozed off at some point. Alice pressed his stinging hands to his eyes to stave the pounding headache. Immediately, the chattering got louder.

"Do you think he's finally finished counting?"

"Who knows."

"Maybe he doesn't know how to play hide and seek."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Oh, he's looking this way."

It seemed making eye contact had been the wrong move, because as soon as Alice showed himself to be awake, two figures approached him with the force of a hurricane. Before he could even get his bearings, the two pulled him to his feet and each tugged on one arm.

"You are awake!" Said the one on the right, with a grin so big his cheeks might split.

"You are awake," parroted the one on the left, with much less enthusiasm.

Alice nodded to them and tried to reply, but just as he opened his mouth, there was a sudden tug on his right.

"You have to play with us!"

Another tug, now to the left. Alice felt his eyes bounce around like ping pong balls.

"Yes, you have to play with us."

Disoriented, Alice weakly attempted to escape from their grasp, but the world was spinning too much for him to find his balance. He stumbled on nothing, and the duo gripped him tighter in reaction.

"Sorry, who are you again?"

Immediately, the two pointed at each other and replied, "We're Tweedledee and Tweedledum."

"Uhm, which is which?"

"I'm Tweedledum," they said.

All three of them shared a look, each as confused as the other. Alice gave them a pleading look, and the duo stared at each other for a long minute before the unfriendly looking one spoke up.

"No, Tweedledum is me," he decided.

The other, apparently Tweedledee, tapped his chin. "Oh. Oh!" He nodded. "You're right."

What a strange thing, for someone to mix up their own name. Weirded out, Alice voiced his perplexion, “Do you guys do that often?”

“Do what?”

“Forget your own names.”

“Very often.”

At that moment, they stepped back and let go of Alice who slumped in relief. Dee and Dum put a hand on their hip, and their movement was so synchronized, it was like he was watching some kind of performance. He wondered if he should be clapping.

“You see, it’s because we are basically the same...” Tweedledee started.

“...So it doesn’t matter either way,” Tweedledum finished.

Together, they exclaimed, “Because we’re twins!”

As impressive as the whole thing was, the act was starting to wear on Alice. His neck was already hurting from moving back and forth between them. On top of it all, although they claimed to be twins, there was not much about them that was similar, with the exception of their color and matching clothes. The “twins” sounded fishier by the second.

“Well,” Alice started, determined to ignore their antics, “I’m guessing you’re the pieces on this square?”

Dee and Dum patted each of his shoulders. “That we are!”

“I see…”

This entire time, the post-nap grogginess and the twins’

rapid fire speaking had kept him sufficiently distracted. Now that he brought up the game, the image of the tea party table, deathly quiet and littered with still bodies, lingered in his mind. He looked down at his bloodied and torn stockings and pressed his lips into a tense line.

There had to be another way, right?

“You two said you wanted to play,” Alice recalled. “What kind of game did you have in mind?”

They counted on their fingers as they alternated between replying:

“Hide and seek!” Dee started.

“Cards,” Dum continued.

“Darts is also a must.”

“Or anything that comes to mind.”

Alice pondered this for a moment. Although the White Rabbit said he could only win by stealing their names, at first the instructions given were simply that he needed to “win”, no specifics. It could be a simple case of withholding information, but with the Queen’s interference in the whole set-up, Alice couldn’t ignore the possibility that he was being purposely spurred on.

He wasn’t sure for what purpose the Queen would do such a thing, but for now he only needed to worry about trying different methods.

“I want to play with you two,” Alice announced. “Why don’t we get started? There’s no time to lose.”

The two clapped their hands and positioned themselves behind Alice so they could both push him forward. “Excellent! Excellent!” They exclaimed.

There was little point in questioning where they were headed, so Alice stayed quiet. From this angle, it was impossible to look at either of them while being discreet, so he didn’t try to hide his stare. While Tweedledee seemed genuinely happy, and even beamed at Alice when their eyes met, his brother on the other hand had a gloomy aura about him. Without looking at him, Alice could feel he was being watched.

Despite Tweedledum’s suspicion of Alice, the brothers still led him right into their houses. Upon entering, Alice was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of things littered around the room. In the middle of the floor, there was a completed puzzle, although all the pieces seemed to somehow be from different images. Around it, there was a tower of cards precariously balanced, a line of tumbled dominoes, bright colored chess pieces and all sorts of games Alice had never seen before. Even the walls were lined with roulettes and darts boards. Alice looked at it all and then back at his hosts.

“You two sure do like to play games,” he commented.

“Everyone here does!” Replied Dee.

“Including His Majesty.”

“His Majesty even taught us how to play most of these games.”

It was a strange thing to imagine: the Red Queen, on the messy floor, patiently teaching these strange siblings how to play something as mundane as a normal game of cards. Alice shuffled on his feet.

“Did you… have fun? Playing with him?”

“The Queen is the most fun person in Wonderland,” they replied.

The lack of hesitance was, somehow, unsettling.

“I think we should start playing,” Alice deflected.

He found a vacant spot where he could sit and invited them to follow suit. They sat across Alice, seemingly uncaring for all the cards they were now ruining by sitting on top of them.

“Before we can play…”

“You have to pick a game.”

Alice gently shook his head. “I don’t mind what it is, as long as we get to play. You can pick it instead.”

The twins exchanged a look and in a flash, Tweedledee was up to to search for something in another room. As soon as his brother left, Tweedledum’s expression fell even further, and there was clear boredom in the way he stared at the wall with a displeased look. Alice studied him and frowned.

“Hey,” he called softly. “Why do you go along with this?”

Dee inclined his head in question. Alice was grateful that, at least for now, the gesture was pretty neutral rather than hostile. He gestured to Dum and to the room around them.

“This act of yours. I don’t think you care much for it, and you

two are clearly very different from each other. Why act like you're the same?"

For a moment, Alice thought he might not answer that question. Dum sulked for a long minute before finally shrugging.

"Because my brother wants to," he explained. "So I'll do it for him. Is that such an absurd thought?"

"A little," Alice admitted.

"Maybe because you don't have anyone to care for."

Alice fell silent. If Tweedledum noticed his discomfort, he didn't care enough to apologize for it. In the tense atmosphere between them, Tweedledum burst back into the room.

"I got us a board game!" He announced, unfazed (or failing to notice) the mood change. As if a switch had been pressed inside his mind, Tweedledum's uninterested posture melted away in a blink.

Alice frowned at him, and received a glare for his troubles.

Well then.

Tweedledum behavior aside, the game was more important now. This was his opportunity to test how liberal the "win" requirement was for him to proceed, but for that Alice would

have to attain victory in whatever games they played. So, even when Tweedledee babbled about the convoluted rules of what they would be playing, Alice listened attentively to every word and absorbed as much of it as his brain was able to comprehend.

After that, it was a matter of concentrating. The twins didn't seem particularly worried about the outcome, while Alice considered every move carefully. Soon enough, he had managed to reach the goal before the other, but he was too tense to feel the victory. He looked at Tweedledee, who had thrown himself at the floor and bemoaning his loss; then at Tweedledum, who congratulated him with the most sorry excuse of an applause that Alice had ever seen before.

Nothing was happening. Alice swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Let's play some more."

And so they did. The twins' collection of games was quite vast, and whenever one finished, Alice jumped right into the next. To his dismay, he didn't win all of them, but he was ahead of both Dee and Dum by quite a lot. Still, their attitude never changed. The cards Alice held had already creased from the

tense grip he had on them.

Tweedledee, who had just looked up from his cards, paused when he saw Alice's face. He shuffled closer and pressed his thumb to creases between Alice's eyebrows.

"You look really desperate for someone who's winning," Dee commented. "Your face looks funny that way."

Alice clenched his jaw and looked to the side. Tweedledee tried to follow him to continue watching his expression, but Tweedledum pulled him back.

"Leave him be," Tweedledum said. "Some people just have that sort of look."

"What sort?" Alice snapped.

"That says they're desperately trying to reach the water surface although they can't swim."

There was scorn in the way Tweedledum looked at him; it wasn't too different from Cheshire's expression back at the gates. He was being looked down on, and Alice knew as much. He was tired of it in more ways than one, but he hated his own powerlessness most of all.

If all the hours he had spent playing silly games had just been a delay to an immutable outcome...

Alice slammed her cards down.

"I need to check something."

He stormed out of the room, and closed the door with a bang. As much as the noise was satisfying and helped alleviate his frustration somewhat, Alice regretted the tantrum almost

immediately. He realized he was pouting, but refused to fix his expression. He marched all the way to the gates, but slowed down as he caught sight of the iron bars.

As he had feared, the gates were closed. Alice gazed out past them, and a gentle breeze ruffled his hair. This place was much higher than he had imagined it to be, though he couldn't gauge how deep the cliff on the other side went in the dark. Distantly, he heard the sound of running water.

"I suppose I really can't win without stealing their name," Alice whispered.

"Have you come to accept your fate?" Cheshire asked. "I hope you don't intend to attempt climbing again. Next time, you are sure to suffer such a great fall, you won't recover from it."

She smiled maliciously. In a way, he had been expecting her to show up like this. Alice regarded her with a neutral expression. Cheshire paused.

"You are becoming quite jaded, aren't you, little Alice?" She appraised. "I will reward you for that attitude. It's possible to win if you possess the wits to pull such a move. Are you capable of such a thing?"

Alice didn't dignify that with an answer. Cheshire allowed her smile to linger in the air before disappearing for good. He rolled his eyes and turned on his heels.

"I don't understand a single word out of your mouth."

Upon reaching the tiny house the twins shared, Alice

stopped by the door. Eyes closed, he took a deep breath, and released in a sigh. *Here goes nothing.*

This time, he was much gentler with the door on the way in. Although he was quiet, the twins still noticed his return and looked up as Alice stepped inside. Surely he could apologize, much like he'd had to do at the tea party, and the words tickled his throat. However, Alice was losing his patience; the imaginary clock in his head still ticked away.

The desire to move forward was greater than any forced politeness he had always imposed on himself.

"Do you want to play something else?" Alice asked suddenly, foregoing any form of greeting. "I have an idea this time."

If Tweedledum had seemed skeptical of him before, now he was fully doubtful of Alice's intentions. It was clear in his face. What mattered, however, was that Tweedledee threw his cards aside to beam at him, filled with enthusiasm.

"What sort of game?" He prompted.

"We can't say yes if we don't know what game it is," Tweedledum added, harsher than his brother.

Alice patted down his dusty shorts and sat down next to the twins. Immediately, Tweedledee leaned closer, and his brother followed his movements.

"It's called statue, it's a pretty simple game," he started. "One of us is the statue, meaning you can't move or make any sounds while the other person tries to make you flinch or laugh. Easy to understand, right?"

They nodded.

"So, do you want to give it a try?"

"Yes, yes!" Tweedledee agreed without missing a beat.

Tweedledum hesitated, but completed, "...We'd like that very much."

It was almost funny how ungenuine he was. Alice chuckled despite himself.

"Dee, why don't you be the statue first?" Alice suggested. "Your brother has a scary face, I doubt it'd be easy to impress him enough to get him to move."

Tweedledee laughed at the jab, but clamped his mouth shut a moment later. He was as stiff as a board and looked straight ahead. He was barely breathing, and his eyes were brimming with tears. Alice wanted to remind him he could at least *blink*, but let it go in favor of getting to work. With Tweedledee engrossed in the game and still, Alice could easily appraise his clothing in search for his name. Given that all the others had their name on a visible accessory, he doubted this time would be any different.

After a minute or so of studying Tweedledee's outfit, his brother interrupted.

"You're not even doing anything," he complained.

Alice waved a dismissive hand. "I'm deciding what's the best way to get him, give me a minute."

As suspicious as his actions were, Alice was sure Tweedledum wouldn't do anything—not immediately, at least.

As long as he kept Tweedledee entertained, he had more than enough time.

The interruption wasn't a detriment, either, as an idea struck Alice as he looked between the twins. With how they acted, wouldn't their names be on a matching article of clothing? And if it had to be something removable… Alice leaned in, eyes downcast. On the ribbon around Tweedledee's neck, he could see something embroidered on its folds, hidden from sight.

That had to be it.

Alice closed his eyes and pulled. He heard a thump, followed by Tweedledum's panicked gasp.

"So I was right," he muttered.

Alice peeked at the ribbon, and saw the first strokes of Tweedledee's family name before his attention drifted to Tweedledum. He was quiet for a long moment as he held onto his sleeping brother, but, rather unexpectedly, he laughed.

"I knew going along with him wouldn't do us any good in the long-run," he admitted fondly. "People like him have a talent for finding trouble without meaning to."

Tweedledum laid his brother on the ground before turning to Alice. He raised an eyebrow.

"Checkmate, is it?"

"No," Alice shook his head, "because you're not my final objective."

"Right, you can't really checkmate a sacrificial piece."

The ominous way he talked no longer shocked Alice, who had long given up on getting straight answers from Tweedledum—or anyone down here, for that matter. He'd just have to take his discomfort to the Queen.

Quietly, Tweedledum watched him. He smirked as he looked down to his ribbon and hooked a finger around it's loop.

"I never trusted you, by the way," he stated. "You're just like the Red Queen."

With a tug, the ribbon slipped off. Alice managed to catch it before it fluttered to the ground, and Tweedledum fell not a second later. He clenched his fist around the ends of the ribbons and raised them to eye level, so the names written in matching red and yellow thread were easier to read.

Ryuu Katsura and Daisuke Hasumi.

"They don't have the same surname," Alice mused to himself.

He looked at the two brothers and smiled sadly.

6

Interlude

OUTSIDE, THE SUN SHONE BRIGHTLY, although not enough time had passed for dawn to break. Standing at the edge of the cliff, Alice shielded his eyes from the sun and gingerly leaned forward, surveying the long distance to the ground. The river he had heard was farther away, too distant to reach with a leap. Directly under him was an abandoned looking train station, as well as train tracks. Thankfully, his fears were assuaged by the sight of the long and sturdy platform that lined the side of the cliff, its staircase leading all the way down to the station. Alice held onto the railings and began descending in careful, deliberate steps.

When he was just a few set stairs away from reaching the station, he realized how decrepit it truly was. The walls were badly cracked, and plants grew in between the little crevices. The painting was flaking off, with plaster making the floor even dustier. When he stepped onto the platform, something

cracked under his feet. Alice looked from one side to the other, wondering if the station was still in use.

Just as he considered continuing on foot, a bell tolled a few times. He heard the tell-tale sound of wheels on train tracks, growing louder by the second. Alice cranked his neck and spotted a black dot in the distance, heading towards the station. He settled back with his hands folded behind him.

"How have things been so far?"

The train blew his hair into his eyes as it zoomed past, coming to a stop. Alice covered the side of his face with a hand and picked a hair strand out of his waterline. He looked over to the White Rabbit.

"I'm surprised it took you this long to show up," he admitted, not unkindly.

"Did you need my help?"

Alice pondered over it for a moment as he walked into the train. He perused the vacant seats, but the White Rabbit ran past him and plopped down on the seat at the end of the train car. Shrugging, he followed after her and sat down across from her.

The White Rabbit watched him. Her expression was uncharacteristically somber.

"I don't think I needed your help," he muttered, "but I still wanted it."

She tilted her head. "Maybe you're lonely."

"Maybe."

Alice looked out of the window. He froze when he saw his face reflected on the glass. He poked his own cheek, traced the lines of his features. The Queen's confident smile flashed in his mind, followed by Tweedledum's parting words.

You're just like the Queen.

"Am I?" He asked out loud.

"What?"

Alice shook his head. "It's nothing." He sunk further into his hand and averted his eyes. "I was just wondering if you get along with the Queen."

"Of course!" The White Rabbit said brightly. She was beaming when she said, "He's really nice once you get to know him."

"...Alright."

The White Rabbit looked like she wanted to ask him something, but for whatever reason, she held back. For the remainder of the ride, the White Rabbit was quiet. The silence was appreciated at the moment, but it unnerved him in equal amounts. Alice stared down at his lap and willed time to pass faster.

"Hey."

Their bodies jostled as the train stopped. The White Rabbit was already standing, but she waited for Alice to respond, lingering next to his seat.

"Yes?"

"Do you remember the Red Queen's advice?"

The Queen had said a lot of things, be it in person or through others. The advice in question could be anything, really. But there was no hesitation in his mind when Alice replied, "'Don't forget who you are', right?"

On instinct, he put a hand over his chest, where his brooch rested. The White Rabbit didn't miss that little action, and she smiled kindly as she studied him for another second.

"That's good," she decided.

The White Rabbit skipped away. Alice was a few steps behind her, not really in a hurry. The train doors closed just as he made it out of the passenger car, and the White Rabbit was nowhere to be found, as he had expected. Alice's eyes landed on the lone person standing in the middle of the platform, hands on her hips.

"Cheshire," he greeted.

"Dear Alice," she said, "I'm delighted to see you've arrived safely."

7

Invisible Tag

CHESHIRE BOWED DAINTILY, hands at the corners of her skirt as she dipped. Alice returned the gesture, albeit in a clumsy manner. She giggled and hid her grin by looking to the side and opening a parasol, which had not been there just a moment ago. Alice stared at the frilly thing for a moment, but ultimately gave up on making sense of its sudden appearance.

Now safe from the sunrays, Cheshire left the cover of the platform.

“Shall we go, then?”

They left together, walking side by side. The path outside the station was covered in white cobblestone, surrounded by verdant grass. As her shoes clicked on the ground, Cheshire slowed her steps and offered her elbow to Alice. He stared at her arm in confusion.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’d be mortifying for either of us to trip now, wouldn’t it?” She explained and hooked their arms together.

With the picturesque view and the relaxing stroll, Alice suddenly felt he had been transported to a movie of a very different genre. Unsure of himself, he let Cheshire lead the way, staring down at his feet to mind the stray raised edges of the stones.

“Do tell, how did the affair with those twins go?" Cheshire asked conversationally. "They’re a rowdy bunch, but easy to influence when you know what buttons to press.”

Guesswork had taught him as much, but Alice would've appreciated a tip like that hours ago. He frowned.

“It went as smoothly as I had hoped for," Alice replied.

Cheshire walked with confidence in her every step, and he had to struggle to match her rhythm. After a moment of watching her prideful smile, Alice added, "All thanks to your advice.”

It was a struggle not to openly celebrate when her expression opened, her body leaning a little closer to his.

“Well, of course!" She beamed, and maybe it would be a warm sight if Cheshire didn't smile with sharp fangs. It made her every word a veiled threat. "It pleases me to know you acknowledge the value of my words. I’ve been told I speak too much and say too little. Can you believe such a thing?”

If her cryptic "instructions" said anything, then that assessment wasn't unfounded. Alice raised his eyebrows.

“By who? The Red Queen?”

“Oh, don’t be silly," she scoffed. "You really don’t know anything about the Red Queen, do you? One should have more knowledge of their enemy. That’s your strongest weakness.”

“So you’re saying the Queen knows me?”

“Of course.”

An uncomfortable feeling stirred within him. “You sound so sure of him, like a loyal follower.”

“That’s a given.”

No hesitation to be found. If Alice were to be truthful, he could admit that Cheshire even sounded *fond*—they all did, when the Red Queen was concerned. He realized soon after Tweedledum said they were alike: Alice was envious. No matter what sort of methods the Queen applied to his games, all the other pieces were *happy* at the mere mention of him. Alice balled his hands into fists.

“You’re all happy to stand around and participate in his game, no questions asked?” He hissed through his clenched teeth. “I don’t understand what’s the point of all this. You’re not even trying to attack me.”

He paused. The disconcerting silence in his mind was the same that lingered in the air as a piece fell into slumber.

“None of them did,” Alice finished in a whisper.

“Little Alice, what do you think is the purpose of chess pieces?” Cheshire interjected.

“The point should be to win—”

She silenced him by holding up her index finger. “That is to

be expected, what’s the fun in playing a game you can’t win?” Cheshire wagged her finger. “That is an objective, a goal. What is our *purpose?*”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“To protect the Queen. To assure his victory.” Her voice was steel, unyielding and firm. She spoke as if this was the one sure thing in the universe. “Some would say the King is the most important piece, but who would follow such a weak leader? That’s why there are no King pieces in Wonderland.”

Was a Queen who stayed away in his castle while his pieces let themselves be captured much better than a King with little to no power?

“It just sounds like you’re all being sacrificed for selfish reasons.”

Cheshire laughed, loud and unbidden. “Are we?” She tapped her chin. “If it eases your mind, you are bound to cross an aggressive piece soon. That Knight is sure to give you quite the trouble.”

With a forlorn sigh and a slump to her shoulder, she mused, “It’s a pity I won’t be there to see it. Surely it’d be entertaining to watch you fumble.”

"You sound sure of the outcome," Alice pointed. “Do you believe I’ll get that far?”

"*Please*, don't flatter yourself. Your only options are to win against me or stay trapped here forever.” She pouted. “Either way, I'll unfortunately never get the pleasure of watching you

struggle."

"And if I were to attack you now?"

Cheshire smiled sunnily. "Oh, you're welcome to try."

He failed to notice before, but her nails were sharp—which became obvious as they sank into his arm. Alice squirmed away, though Cheshire let him go with ease, causing him to stumble a few steps. He stroked his stinging arm and watched her warily, to Cheshire's amusement.

"Neither of us are getting anywhere, so let us play a guessing game," she suggested. Her parasol disappeared as she posed with a hand on her hip. "You've made through quite a few squares, surely you've attained the necessary knowledge to find one's name."

She gestured to herself and did a slow spin so Alice could get a good look at her entire body. Then, Cheshire cocked her head and waited. His eyes darted nervously to all the frills of her clothing, the ribbon in her pigtails, her sleeves—but he couldn't settle on an answer that he was asked upfront.

"You are the type who can't function under pressure, aren't you?" Cheshire pointed out. "I shall lend you a hand, little Alice. Step by step. Where are names located?"

"...Our clothes. Somewhere that can be accessed."

She clapped politely. "You went a step above what I asked, you have my compliments. That's right, names can't be written somewhere that couldn't be gripped with one's own hands. Which means…"

"They're always accessories. Something visible and easy to remove."

That didn't garner a reaction right away. Cheshire adjusted her hair and smoothed the folds of her skirt. She grinned widely.

"Tell me Alice," she spread her arms open, "where is my name, then?"

He pointed to the black ribbon around her neck. "The bow?"

"Wrong." Cheshire stuck her tongue in disgust. "Repeating the placement is dreadfully boring. Or are you implying I'd match those brothers?"

Although awfully clear now that it had been pointed out to him, Alice never made the connection of the unique placement of each name—with the exception of the twins, who went out of their way to look like each other. The back of his neck burned.

"No…"

"You see, I don't find any thrill in keeping your eyes away from my name," she commented idly.

"The eyes…"

Alice looked up at Cheshire, but he couldn't see her eyes, as it remained covered by the— *that's what she means.* "The mask," he answered. All this time, he had been staring right at it. How fitting. "It's behind the mask."

Instead of replying, Cheshire found the clasps that kept her mask in place and slid it off. It made her hair stick out in odd

angles, but she didn't seem to notice as she turned the mask for Alice to see. He could see her name written along the right corner, but most importantly, he could see the face that laid below the mask.

It was strange how, without that piece of protection, she gave off an entirely different aura. Her features were kinder than her words ever were, with sincere eyes to match. Coupled with the silly sight of her messed up hair, Cheshire just looked like a normal girl.

What a simple, mundane realization. And yet, it made his chest ache.

The moment was short-lived. Cheshire was quick to recompose herself when she noticed his stare, face once again hidden by her mask. She shrunk into herself, as if uncomfortable in her own skin for all of two seconds before she fixed her demeanor. Her smirk was the only warning Alice got before she disappeared.

He whipped his head around, but there was no sign of Cheshire to be found. Then, he felt a tug on his coat. Alice choked on a gasp when he saw Cheshire right in front of him, her nails wrapped around the spades brooch on his chest. He froze in place.

"Your name, on the other hand, is engraved on this cute little brooch of yours." Her tail swished when she let go of the brooch, finger by finger. "Knowing when to listen in is a skill as well."

He had caught sight of Cheshire at the swings, but he didn't think she had stuck around to hear his conversation with the White Rabbit. Alice lay a protective hand over his chest.

"I challenge you to try your best from now on," Cheshire declared, her body disappearing bit by bit until only her hand was visible, waving at him.

Once she was completely gone, she started laughing. Alice followed the sound in an uncertain sprint, looking all around to pinpoint where it came from. It didn't take much longer to realize he was being led astray: every time he was sure he was on the right track, Cheshire's laughter suddenly appeared behind him.

"Over here," she called.

Alice whirled around and saw her skip up ahead. He ran after Cheshire in hopes he could outrun her before she changed direction, but he was a little too late.

"Oops, I meant over here!"

Running wasn't doing him any good, so Alice slowed to a stop. He backed away a few steps and listened carefully. There were light footsteps behind him. Alice turned and ran without a second thought, only to collide face first into a tree.

"I didn't think that'd work so well!" Cheshire laughed, perched on one of the branches. She looked completely at ease up there despite balancing herself on her forearms. "My apologies, did you get hurt?"

Alice held his nose and blinked away the tears blurring his vision. Although it hurt, it wasn't bleeding, and nothing felt out of place. Small mercies.

"Your best may not be enough, Alice."

"It'll have to be," he hissed.

Cheshire offered him a pitying smile, and as if merciful, didn't disappear as she ran out of his reach. Alice was quick to follow, but he came to a halt when the girl jumped as she reached the edge of the river. She landed on one foot at the only stone in the middle of the racing water, and twirled gracefully to face him.

Alice approached the riverbank. Although the water was deep, the current wasn't strong enough to pose a threat. Still, the rock Cheshire stood on was too far; by the time he trudged his way there, she'd be long gone. The girl imitated a ticking clock as Alice stood there thinking of solutions. Alice dipped a hand in the water to double-check it wouldn't just carry him away.

Before he could tell himself no, he took a deep breath and leaped.

He only saw Cheshire's mouth shaped around a perfect "o" before he managed to grab her feet and they both crashed into

the water. Alice, being the only one prepared for the sudden dive, recovered first. Cheshire, on the other hand, struggled to find the surface while coughing. In her panic, she forgot Alice was still holding onto her ankle and keeping her under.

It was painful to watch her fight against the water, so he rushed to end it by tugging her further down and gripping the clasps of her mask. Only then did Cheshire realize what he was doing, so she forced herself still and tried to pry his fingers away. However, her reaction was a little too late. Her mask came undone and floated to the surface. Cheshire reached a hand towards it, but she fell unconscious before she could do much else. The rest of her breath released from her lung in a flurry of bubbles.

Fearing that actual harm may come to Cheshire, Alice didn't bother swimming. With a hand to her back, he pushed her up to the surface. Only after she was safe did he move his arms and legs to get himself out of the water. Alice panted and gasped as the air filled his lungs.

A little distance away, Cheshire's mask floated by his right. He snatched it before it could be lost to the current. Next, Alice put an arm around Cheshire and swam slowly to the riverbank. With a final huff, he managed to lay her on the ground and fall onto his elbows. Alice laughed a little as he clutched the mask in his cold fingers.

"Himari Kaneko sure is a sunny name for someone with your personality," he remarked to the sleeping girl.

Absentmindedly, he remembered how she had shied away from the sun under her parasol. His arms were beginning to grow numb, but Alice gathered the last of his strength to find her the shade of a tree. He laid Cheshire down on a soft patch of grass, and contented himself with doing this much.

He watched over her for a minute.

"I wonder what you'd tell me, after this. If you could, would you let me know if I hold any chance of winning?" He asked Cheshire. "Knowing you, probably not."

The breeze billowed gently. Alice tucked his hair behind his ear.

"I'd still want to ask you, though."

8

The Maze's Riddle

THE PATH PAST THE GATES was surrounded by tall hedges on both sides, trapping him in a linear walk that led to the heart of what was undoubtedly a maze. Although there was only one entrance into the maze, Alice was sure the actual size of it was much bigger than what he could currently see. His attention, however, wasn't on the singular entrance, but rather on the large mushroom that stood in the middle of the plaza. Smaller mushrooms grew out of it like branches, but even those ones were as big as Alice was.

Given the set-up and his experience in the previous squares, someone was bound to present themselves eventually. Alice, freezing in his wet clothes, couldn't muster the energy to do more than wait. He found a small mushroom close to the ground and climbed onto it. His arms and legs ached unpleasantly. Alice rubbed at his stinging eyes.

"It's fine to rest now and then," he mumbled tiredly.

His head drooped. Alice snapped awake and blinked at the eyes staring at him—all six of them.

“Oh,” he said. “Hi.”

“What kind of dream were you having, I wonder,” the person mused, peering curiously at his face.

Her stare was uncomfortable, like she could see more than his expression, something more intangible. Alice turned his face away and let his hair fall over his eyes.

“I wasn’t asleep long enough to dream,” he said.

“I see.”

She backed away from him, buzzing in the air with her translucent wings. Two sets of her eyes closed, leaving just one open. She landed on the ground gracefully and smiled.

“Welcome to the maze. I’m the Caterpillar, your judge.”

Alice looked dubiously at her wings, as well as the sparkling clothes she wore.

“Not a butterfly?” He asked.

As if she had forgotten her own appearance, the Caterpillar paused and tugged at the corner of her wings.

“I have not yet reached the final stage of my life,” she explained. “There’s always room for change.”

Is the requirement for being a Caterpillar simply the ability to change forms at some point in life? Alice wasn’t quite sure, but didn’t linger on the subject—down here, acting as something you are not was common practice, it seemed. He shook his head to get rid of the last bit of sleepiness clinging

onto his consciousness.

“You mentioned you’ll be judging me,” Alice prompted.

“For the path ahead,” the Caterpillar agreed. “I’m sure you’ve noticed there’s only one possible way in.” She pointed to the narrow space between the hedges he had seen before. “It continues like that once you are inside. This maze is quite special in that its passages can only be opened by giving something in return. Nothing is without a cost.”

“What kind of cost?”

“A secret. Something you hold dear. In other words, information. Isn’t that the most important possession of them all?" The caterpillar turned her stare on him. "I am the sole keeper of Wonderland’s secrets. My duty is to judge if your secrets are worth the weight of your path.”

The familiar discomfort in the pit of his stomach grew. Alice had never enjoyed being pried open by others, no matter how close they were to him. And the Caterpillar in particular made him feel exposed with her gaze alone.

“We may start whenever you’re ready," the Caterpillar told him.

Alice swallowed the lump in his throat and got to his feet.

"It's fine," he decided firmly. "We can start now. I don’t want to wait.”

The Caterpillar leveled him with an appreciative look and led the way into the maze. She floated a few centimeters off the ground and stayed a few steps ahead of Alice at all times. The

chance of getting lost in this place was zero, what with its linear path, so the gesture was lost on him.

It escaped his notice just how tall the hedges here were. They stretched up far into the sky, as if they might never end. Coupled with how the path was just wide enough to fit their bodies, it made for a very claustrophobic place. Alice hurried a few steps forward to be closer to the Caterpillar.

The path ended rather abruptly on a dead end. Alice looked up at the Caterpillar as they came to a stop.

“Who are your enemies?” She asked.

He did a double-take. Although Alice had expected to be asked a question or given any other similar prompt, her words made little sense to him.

“The other pieces," he replied in confusion. "I don’t see how that’s a secret.”

“Because it isn’t." The Caterpillar shook her head. "Generic statements won’t get you anywhere around here. You have to look inside yourself, my dear."

She hovered a hand above his chest. "What feelings have you been quietly hiding?" Another hand rested atop his head. "What doubts plague your mind?”

“I don’t…” Alice started, but interrupted himself.

He remembered watching the Mad Hatter's show, playing with the twins and strolling with Cheshire. Although Tweedledum had been suspicious of him from the beginning he never acted on it; even after Alice took his brother from him, he

never lashed out. Cheshire, too, had pretty much led him to her, despite her convoluted way of achieving it. It was almost like they *wanted* Alice to win.

His mind wandered to the White Rabbit. He thought of the way she seemed to never remember things properly, but she was surprisingly reliable where it counted. She was always there to guide him.

He thought of the quietness between them in the train. Her gaze had been distant then, and a little sad, too.

Would he have to steal her name, eventually?

“They were never my enemies, I don’t think I ever saw them that way," Alice admitted. "They never did anything to me. They were just living out their days, as if I wasn’t a threat to their existence."

The Caterpillar was no different, was she? He was once again being led by those he was supposed to defeat. Alice frowned.

"How can I call someone like that my enemy? I'm numb to the guilt by now… That should scare me, I think.”

Perhaps it should be a relief to finally speak of his doubts, but it only weighed more heavily in Alice's mind. If they weren't his enemy, then…

What the hell was Alice even doing here?

“There’s more," the Caterpillar interjected. "The final piece of the puzzle.”

Her eyes were open again, and she leaned closer to look into

his.

“You can’t hide your heart from me," she warned.

“I already answered your question," Alice protested.

“There’s one more person you’ve failed to mention. The most crucial participant in this game of chess.”

“The Red Queen…”

Alice made a point of keeping the Queen out of his thoughts. Whenever he was involved, matters got five times more complicated. The Red Queen, more than anyone, made him unsure of himself.

“I don’t know," Alice murmured. "It’s easier to go on when I think of him as my enemy. I know he’s manipulating the outcome of the game. Still, I…"

He clutched his arm and looked away.

"Somehow, I feel he isn’t here to really hurt me.”

“That’s right. That turmoil is what makes you so hesitant," the Caterpillar asserted without malice. "You haven’t questioned this world at all in your journey because you fear the truth."

Weakly, Alice nodded his ascent.

"You may continue.”

The plants covering the way wilted and fell onto the ground in ashy remains, opening the way forward. They kept moving. With nothing to look at, Alice had no choice but to wallow in his thoughts. His uneasiness grew.

"This is your second question, Alice," the Caterpillar said at

the next dead end. “If not an enemy, who is the Red Queen?”

Alice couldn't hold back his grimace. “Oh.”

“I seem to have touched a sore spot," she remarked, amused.

“I just don’t know what to make of him," he protested weakly. "He came off as arrogant, he had a terrible attitude. He’s fine with dirty methods being used, and even encourages it. He always has a hand in directing me to take certain paths. You could say he’s the mastermind behind all this.”

Alice cut off his rant with a dissatisfied huff. The Caterpillar cocked her head.

“But?”

“But he gets along with his pieces, and they’re all willing to follow him. He does whatever he pleases, but that’s something that requires complete confidence in yourself. I’m envious of him."

He laughed humorlessly. "It’s no wonder everyone keeps saying my will is weak." His hands shook a little, so Alice clenched them into fists. "Compared to him, I’m just…”

“That’s enough,” the Caterpillar interrupted, voice quiet and calm.

“Thank you.”

They continued forward. The sky above was just a distant splotch. Alice looked up and tried to find it in himself to remain calm. It was, after all, only a question, no matter what kind of secret it revealed. Still, he couldn't get rid of the dread blaring inside his head.

"This is the final question, Alice."

Alice halted and looked at the Caterpillar. She was looking directly at him again.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"What kind of question is that?" He responded without thinking. The Caterpillar remained quiet.

"Fine. Let me think for a minute…"

If it was about who he was… Cheshire had said their existence was ruled by their names, which was kept a secret here in Wonderland. That had to be it.

“I’m…” He undid the clasp on his brooch. Part of him didn’t want to, but he still unhooked the brooch and clutched it in his hand. “Kokichi—”

“Kokichi Ouma, yes,” the Caterpillar finished. She pressed her hand over Alice’s and pushed it to his chest, shaking her head. “The rule is that you must tell me a secret, Alice.”

The pin on the backside dug into his palm.

“May I ask how did you know that?

“Your name?” The caterpillar chuckled. Her eyes opened wide as her wings fluttered open. She peered into Alice like she knew everything there is to know about him. “I am acquainted with that name, after all.”

Alice had been sure that, other than the White Rabbit and the Cheshire Cat, no one knew his true name, much less where it was hidden. To have that security shattered yet again left him unstable on his feet.

“From where?”

“The Queen, of course.” She inclined her head. “Did you not know you share the same name? In many ways you two are a mirror of each other.”

If names defined one’s existence here, then why would they share a name?

If he won in a game of chess against the Queen, he could do anything, escape or rule over it. That was what he was told. He had to prove, somehow, that he was stronger than the Red Queen.

Suddenly, the entire game made more sense inside his head. The Red Queen and him, they were both fighting for the right to exist.

“That was the only secret I had,” Alice said, dismayed. “I don’t have anything else.”

That drew a sigh from the Caterpillar.

“You know yourself so little you’re not even certain what

your own secret is?" She asked, voice colored with disappointment. "Forgetting who you are is a grave mistake in Wonderland, I'm sure you've been told."

"I didn't forget."

"Then *who* are you, Alice?"

"I don't know. I don't know! Isn't that already a secret?" It was a moot point, he knew as much, but the new revelation of what, exactly, was at stake if he were to lose the game made Alice desperate enough to try and bargain with any of his chips, no matter how unreasonable.

"No."

"Please, I'm so close," Alice pleaded.

The Caterpillar took a hold of his shoulders, while her second pair of arms cupped his cheeks. He tried to escape the touch, but only succeeded in backing himself into a wall.

"Those who are not sure of who they are should never progress in this game," the Caterpillar stated matter-of-factly.

"What kind of secret could I have?" Alice whispered fervently, voice shaking. "I've already said everything I could…"

Her six eyes were wide as she peered into him, seeing something that even Alice himself couldn't.

"There's still so much for you to reveal," she insisted.

She continued to hover above him. Alice couldn't blink. He couldn't move. He was so close. He was...

"It's always like this," he said quietly. "All of you, talking as if you know something I don't. Looking down on me. You think

I'm incompetent, naive, an idiot."

Alice pushed the Caterpillar away and stumbled back five steps. His shoulders were rigid, as if prepared for a blow that never came. He glared up at the Caterpillar.

"I can't stand this place! And I can't stand you. I hate your knowing smiles. I hate your tests." He gasped a breath in, then out. "All for what, to play a game that isn't even fun? What's the point in that?"

Had he always cared about something like that? He couldn't tell anymore. His heart beat wildly in his chest. It was all he heard inside his mind, a cacophony of white noise.

"Well, I'll destroy your Queen and you won't be there to cry over it! Is that the truth you wanted so badly?!"

His throat hurt—not from yelling, but because the uneasiness grew stronger, tying knots inside his esophagus. Alice stared down at his own hands.

"Fascinating," the Caterpillar remarked in wonder. "Have you always been like this? Is that your true personality?"

"I've always been myself," he replied numbly. "Who else would I be?"

The Caterpillar laughed. "I see, I understand now! Your path is already open, Alice. You're ready. What a delight."

She patted her head for the flower adorning her hair. "Your secrets, I'll hold them dearly." She offered the flower to Alice.

All around them, the maze started to wilt. The perfect green turned brown and rained around them, revealing the white

clouds in the sky. The only to escape that fate was the flower in his grasp, with Mayumi Mizuho's name written in its folds.

Alice stood amongst the decay. He could see the castle up ahead, only one square away now.

Why was it that he felt such a strong sense of loss, then?

9

Proof of Resolve

THERE WERE NO DELAYS on his way out of the maze. On the other side, there was only a courtyard between him and the castle. There were roses blooming, red and pink intertwined. At the entrance to the castle, stood the Red Queen and his quiet guard. As he approached, the card soldier moved to intercept his steps with a sword to his throat.

"Halt," the guard ordered.

Alice froze; he didn't dare move, barely breathing—his gaze, however, was on the Queen. Noticing his stare, the Red Queen smirked in response and did an insincere bow.

"So, you made it here!" The Queen said in admiration. "Maybe you're less useless than I had expected. Congratulations."

"Spare me your sarcasm," Alice replied coldly. "Are you here to stop me?"

"No, not me," he denied. "The stage isn't ready yet. We all

have our roles to play."

The Red Queen turned to his soldier. "Don't go easy on him," he ordered. "If Alice isn't strong enough to progress…" His eyes were narrowed into slits as he grinned. "You can kill him."

Alice froze and took a step back on instinct. The Red Queen waved at him.

"Maybe we'll see each other soon. Don't disappoint me now, Alice."

It was hard to decipher the look on the Red Queen's face—though his eyes squinted as if in a smile, there was no curve to the corner of his lips. It was all Alice could see before he retreated to his castle in a flurry of long cape and ruffles. He had no chance to consider following after the Red Queen: as soon as the thought crossed his head, the sword poked at the delicate skin of his throat. It was not enough to draw blood, but it was close.

"I don't suppose you'd let me pass," Alice deadpanned.

The guard didn't change positions, as still as stone even when Alice spoke. Carefully, he took one step back, then another. When the guard made no move to stop him, he finally breathed out a relieved sigh. Alice rubbed his neck, glad to find no injuries there.

"I'm sorry to inform you, but your journey ends here," the guard stated. His body blocked the only entrance to the Queen's castle. "By order of His Majesty, the Queen, I order you to leave."

"That's what I thought," Alice murmured as he increased the distance between them.

This was the Queen's Knight. If Cheshire's word was to be trusted, then he wouldn't sit idly and let Alice take his name like the others did. He'd have to think of another way to steal his name. If they really were to fight, Alice would be on the disadvantage—

He just barely managed to fall to the side as the first sword strike came. Alice, flat on the floor, looked up at the card soldier with wide eyes. He could still feel the graze of the sword on his cheek.

"W-Wait a minute," he pleaded.

Another strike, this time to his right hand. Alice fell onto his back in haste to move away. He glanced at the sword embedded into the ground and made use of the delay to get to his feet and run in the opposite direction.

He couldn't mind his direction; Alice kept his eyes past his shoulders, watching the approach of the card soldier. He wasn't running yet, but he walked with intent, a firm grip on his sword at all times. Alice almost stumbled on a step as his legs started to shake.

There was no chance of winning against him. Alice was quickly starting to feel the effects of all the other trials through the board. Running on burning legs, his mind was too fuzzy to think of something. The card soldier was raising his sword again. He just needed to escape. He needed to—

"Agh!"

Alice clutched his arm. His fingers became wet, and he realized he was bleeding. The injury was shallow, but shock was setting in. All this time, Alice had never entertained the idea that he might be in danger. Right now, however, paralyzed in fear and unable to do anything but watch as the Knight marched his way, he realized for the first time that he might die here. He shook his head slowly.

"I won't have mercy on you even if you stand around," the card soldier informed him quietly. There was no rush in his voice, no desperation. He flicked his sword free of Alice's blood. "Even if you have his face, that won't save you."

Alice staggered on his feet. The Red Queen… Was that what awaited him atop the castle? Would he have to fight his way out, tooth and nail? The adrenaline numbed the pain, but it also silenced Alice's thought. All he heard was static.

If it came down to it, could he really be stronger? Could he really win?

There was no one here who would validate his wish to survive.

"I don't want to die…" Alice murmured.

The card soldier was before him, and the wall was behind him. Louder, angrier, he yelled, "I'm not going to die!"

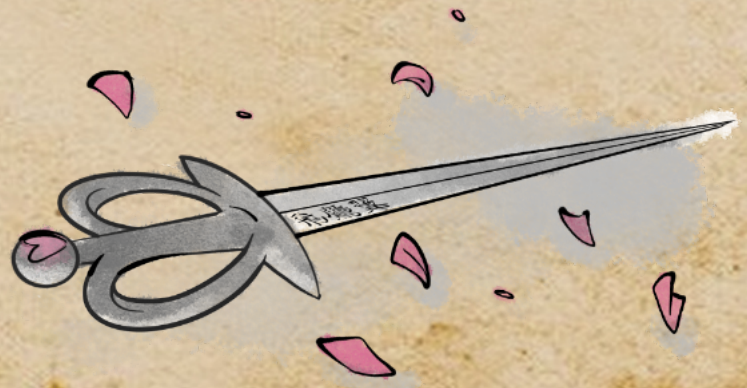
The burning tears spilled down his cheek. The card soldier faltered, hand stilling. It was nothing more than a mere second. But Alice zeroed in on that hesitation and took full advantage

of it. He kicked at the Knight's stomach, who froze as his breath was stolen away. That was enough opening for Alice to hit his dominant hand. The card soldier's sword went flying a few meters away. Alice lunged for the sword, and the Knight lunged for him.

The collision with the ground made stars appear in his vision, and the added weight on his back worsened the pain. All of that, however, was irrelevant to Alice, who was lost in the euphoria of the cold touch of the sword handle on his palm. He tightened his hold around it and squirmed from under the card soldier, teeth gritted.

He turned immediately, sword at the ready, but paused when the card sword didn't move. Alice didn't quite register what happened, not yet, but he inspected the sword on what was nothing more than routine. *Tsubasa Hidaka.* The engraving on the blade of the sword was meticulous, lovingly made.

The sword clattered to the ground.



“Hey…” Alice called, voice trembling. “Get up. This kind of ending, I can't...”

Of course, he got no response.

“I told you to get up! Even though you said you wouldn’t go easy on me, you did, didn’t you? When you saw me crying. When you saw *his* face crying. Doesn’t that mean I only won because of him?” He pressed his hands to his face. “How am I supposed to go on knowing that?”

Every step of the way, he was reminded of how *inadequate* he was. With words cutting and merciless. The card soldier's taciturnity should've been his respite. But even here Alice was rejected; he was denied any satisfaction.

"Give me a break already."

A hand landed on his shoulder. The touch was light, as if afraid to get too close. Alice still flinched. The White Rabbit watched him with kind eyes.

"Alice," she greeted, quiet and somewhat glum. "I'm glad you're okay." The White Rabbit lingered on his tears and his still bleeding arm. "For the most part.”

"You're here to tell me to go, aren't you?" He asked. Alice brushed her hand away and looked down to the ground. "You're my guide after all, that's your job."

He clenched his fists and turned around, towards the castle. "Fine."

"Wait!" The White Rabbit called. She hurried to catch his arm. "Wait."

Her eyes flicked back and forth as she thought of something, a certain desperation to her. Finally, she calmed herself with comically large breaths, and Alice somehow found it in himself to smile as she filled her cheeks with air.

Once she got ahold of herself, the White Rabbit admonished, "You're a mess, you can't fight the Queen in that state, can you?"

She rubbed at the dried tear tracks on his cheeks with a thumb, hard enough to leave his face stinging and red. Then, as if it'd do anything, she patted his hair down.

"Why are you still acting like I can win?" Alice asked tiredly. As an afterthought, he smiled sardonically and added, "Unless you actually believe that. That'd be a first."

The expression displeased the White Rabbit, who tugged at his cheeks to get rid of the tense smile.

"I don't know what's going to happen," she admitted. Her voice was angry, maybe frustrated with herself. "My role is just to make sure you get this far. But since you're here, you should give it your best, right?"

Alice sighed somewhat fondly. "That's very positive of you."

"Of course!" She beamed. "It's what I'm here for."

The White Rabbit paused, and the familiar look that told she had just remembered important information downed on her. She clapped her hands together.

"Actually, I needed to give you something!" She started rummaging through her bag, tongue sticking out from the

corner of her mouth. "Remember, you're supposed to get crowned. For reaching the end of the board. I know I have it here some- Aha!"

She pulled her hands out after a bit of struggling.

"Tadah! Here you are." She presented the golden crown to him with a proud grin. "No no, wait."

The White Rabbit turned her back on him as she searched inside her bag again. After a long minute of mumbling to herself, she held up the crown again, this time properly displayed on a red cushion.

"*Now* it's ready!" Although she was still smiling, it was tinged with melancholy. "It's your crowning, so it should be a proper ceremony."

Alice hovered over the crown. He didn't take it yet.

"I don't think this is much of a formal occasion," he commented.

"Shhh, don't worry, I'm very good at pretending."

He traced the name engraved inside the crown with his eyes. He pursed his lips into a frown. While he hesitated, the White Rabbit briefly lowered herself to take the sword Alice had carelessly dropped.

She pushed it into his hands.

"You should take this if you want to have a fighting chance," the White Rabbit explained. "Give it your all!"

She took the crown into her hands and raised it towards Alice. He hesitated for a second more, but in the end relented by lowering his head. The crown was heavy on his temple.

"Bye bye, Alice," the White Rabbit whispered.

Alice caught her before she could fall. It felt strange, how light she was; all this time, her personality seemed so much larger than this terrible game. It was a strange time to notice just how small she truly was.

"Bye bye, Megumi Kogane."

10

Checkmate

THE INSIDE DECOR OF THE CASTLE was bright and attention grabbing, with card suits plastered onto the walls. Wherever Alice went, there were red and white chess pieces lying around; the chandelier hovering above the entrance hall had at least three dozen pawns hanging from it. Alice followed the spiral staircase to the upper rooms. On one of the railings, rested a lone bishop; he flicked it away before continuing.

The stairs went on for a long time. As Alice ascended, he could see the rest of Wonderland through the passing windows. The word outside was vibrant in a different way than the castle was, less plastic. His steps echoed up the tower, and for a moment Alice thought he might never reach the peak.

The throne room, when he finally made it there, had its door wide open. Alice didn't wait for an invitation. He didn't need one, as the Red Queen, sat on his oversized throne, watched his

every step like a mechanical doll. It never occurred to him just how *small* he looked until the evidence was presented so blatantly like this.

The Red Queen was smirking, confident in himself. Alice, however, wondered if he too looked like that: unfit for the space he occupied, compensating for all the extra room he did not fill. It made him self-conscious—Alice had to fight against the urge to shrink further into himself.

"Well, well. I guess even the weak ones can make it far if they put their mind to it," the Queen said cheerfully. He hopped down from his throne and leaned on his cane. "Good for you."

"The card soldier is gone," Alice flatly announced. "The White Rabbit too."

There was trepidation in the look the Queen leveled him with. It could be just the confusion—anything other than that was outside Alice's comfort to infer.

"I mean, *duh*." The Red Queen gestured meaningfully to Alice. "If you're here, that's a given. I'm sorry, did you just want to waste time with a pointless conversation?"

"No, I just thought you'd care."

That gave the Queen pause. It was a moment of such momentary hesitation, it'd be inexistent to everyone else's eyes. But Alice knew that look, he had seen it in the mirror. Trepidation and self-doubt. At the end, though, the Red Queen settled for rolling his eyes in boredom.

"We all have our roles to play, Alice," he said firmly. "I

thought you'd realize that by now, but maybe I was expecting too much."

Alice didn't have a response to that. He still didn't know where he fit in all this, and he was never that good at pretending. All he knew was mindless survival. The Red Queen, on the hand, walked with the poise of someone who fit into the clothes, someone who filled the void of the space he was forced to occupy, rather than be swallowed by it. Alice adjusted the grip on his sword and lowered his body in an imitation of what he saw the card soldier do, but on him it was clumsy and inexperienced. His opponent sneered and descended the steps down the throne.

"It's time we get down to business already, don't you think?" He stopped in front of Alice. "What is *your* role?"

His words were punctuated by the slide of metal; as he held one hand on each extreme of his cane, the Queen split it apart, revealing the blade that lay underneath. The Red Queen appreciated the glimmer of it for a moment before pointing the rapier at Alice.

"Tell me, who are you?"

Alice raised his borrowed sword, making sure it blocked the Queen's from directly reaching him.

"I don't have to answer that," he declared. "I'm myself, that's it."

The Queen laughed. His voice bounced on the walls and amplified, making it all the more unpleasant.

"*Yourself!* As if that means anything!"

The first strike came right then, while the Red Queen was still recovering from his fit. It wasn't a particularly strong swing, but the suddenness of it had Alice scrambling to parry with enough force to knock the Queen back.

"I don't know anything about roles, but I have no intention of giving in to you."

Somewhere, the Red Queen hid the name "Kokichi Ouma," just as Alice did. His impulse was to apologize, for forcing the both of them into the situation. But he had a feeling the Queen wasn't someone who cared for apologies, for sincere sentiment. All he could do was match their intensity, their ambition.

It was all Alice could offer, to the both of them.

Alice aimed his sword at the Queen. Although his opponent's blade was much larger, it didn't stop the Queen from meeting him halfway, and they clashed with a clang of metal. The impact sparked needles on his nerve ends, but Alice held his ground, jumping to a safe distance with only a second of delay.

"You're willing to put up a fight, I see," the Queen commented. "I was afraid you'd make winning way too boring."

Despite the situation, Alice managed to smile. "I kinda made a promise," he explained lightly, although the weight of the crown on his head threatened to overtake him.

The Red Queen whistled lowly. "Look at you, being all positive." His face contorted into an ugly scowl. "It's so

irritating seeing that on my own face."

All the levity he felt drained in a matter of seconds. Alice set his jaw; he felt his blood run hot in his veins. Through the adrenaline, he could no longer feel the muscle pain from holding the sword. Alice pushed forward, though he was swiftly blocked. They both backed away one step, never too far from each other.

"Don't act like this face is yours," Alice hissed.

"Semantics."

In an attempt to overpower the Queen with strength alone, Alice pushed himself forward with his lower body. Though it added the desired momentum, it also made his attack imprecise. The Red Queen sidestepped out of the way. As Alice scrambled to turn around, he was struck on the back of the neck with the pummel. His balance faltered, but he managed to recover before he fell. Alice frowned as he struck again.

"Why go easy on me now?" He asked. Again, the nauseating shock of the swords made it hard to move. "You could've gone for a killing blow."

"You can say I have my reasons." The Red Queen smiled maliciously. "But if you really want to…"

His blade made a shallow cut on Alice's cheek before he could move out of the way. In a delayed reaction, Alice raised his sword, trying to defend himself against an attack long gone. The Red Queen watched with cold eyes.

"I can always get serious."

Alice rubbed the back of his hand on the wound, smearing the blood across his face. "Please do."

"We're the same alright!" The Queen laughed.

He came at Alice again, but didn't relent after the first block. He found a rhythm to continue striking in between the pain and the shockwaves, a precision to his attacks that Alice lacked. Left, right, left, right, left, right… Alice struggled to keep up the pace, every collision making his shoulder twinge. Left—

His arm didn't move in time.

Alice moved out the way. It wasn't graceful or even efficient, and his ankle ached as he landed on it wrong. In that brief pause, the Queen swinged upwards, and the tip of his rapier caught on the brooch at Alice's chest. He fumbled to catch it as it flew into the air, but his hand was struck with the flat of the blade. The brooch fell with a clatter, and the Queen promptly thrusted his sword into the middle of it. Paralyzed, Alice attempted to catch his breath while the Queen briefly paused to roll his shoulders.

"You say you're 'yourself', but you're not too different from me," the Queen mused out loud. He glanced over towards Alice. "It's about time you answer my question, Alice. Who are you?"

Alice clenched his mouth shut and attempted to attack again, but his movements were sloppy, and they barely came close to each other. He stared at the Queen and stubbornly remained silent.

"You do realize this is important, right?" The Queen mocked.

"I mean, I *did* tell you not to forget. But maybe you already did—"

"I didn't. I know who I am, I don't need a brooch to tell me that." Alice raised his sword, despite his body screaming against the motion. "I'm Kokichi Ouma, that's all that matters right now."

The Queen smirked.

"Checkmate."

He threw his sword aside. It fell with a clang. The noise, along with the baffling action, distracted Alice from the Queen, who grasped his wrist with a thumb pressed against a nerve. Alice cried out and let go of the pummel. Not yet satisfied, the Queen kicked the fragile side of his ankle, and he collapsed onto his knees.

"You're done," the Red Queen whispered. "Yield."

"...Why?"

"'Why'? Why did you lose? Why am I overpowering you like this?" He leaned closer, hovering over Alice, face devoid of expression. "Because you played by my rules. You accepted every single one of them. You didn't even question it, not a single time."

The Queen stroked his cheek, but there was no affection in it. It was, more than anything else, an appraisal. Alice could see the disgust in his eyes, could feel it pouring down his throat like poison.

"You said you don't care about roles, but you fell into yours

so well. Like it was made for you. 'Kokichi Ouma', I wonder where your true name went."

He stepped back. The Red Queen took both swords into his hands. His gaze never left Alice's trembling body, even as he struggled back onto his feet.

"I just… Wanted to survive… No matter what," Alice explained between breaths.

"Survival isn't enough. In a game like this, you either destroy it, or you die. That's all there is to it." The Queen watched him with pity. "You were just never meant for things like this, Alice."

Alice had no strength left in him. No matter how much he struggled, how much he told himself to keep fighting, his body refused to. From the moment the checkmate was announced, a veil fell over his mind.

This was a defeat. He lost.

Though he tried to cry, that too was taken away from him. Not even his eyes would work anymore. He crumpled to the ground.

"It's nighttime, Alice," the Red Queen told him.

Distantly, he registered he was being carried somewhere. Alice blinked slowly as he was laid down. His consciousness was slipping away from him, but he forced his eyes open. Alice could barely move, and something cold enveloped him. Holographic light played in his vision, and the Red Queen stared at him from the other side of the window. When he lifted his hand, it hit smooth glass. Their faces, so similar,

reflected each other, an imperfect mirror.

"It's about time you went to sleep."

Alice closed his eyes.

Epilogue

KOKICHI LOOKED AT THE FRAGMENT of himself, trapped forever in the mirror, and managed to feel a little bad for it. Not by much, however. He had no need for anyone who would ruin his chances at winning.

He wasted too much time in this silly world and its pointless game. There was never a chance that he could lose, because he knew himself, knew "Alice," who now slept peacefully. As if he had never struggled to the very end. How ironic.

"Did I use to be like that?" He wondered. "You don't even have a name anymore, so I doubt there's any part of you left in this world or anywhere else."

The mirror itself was all the proof he needed: above the glass, the name "Alice" was engraved. Not even Kokichi Ouma.

"You really never stood a chance," Kokichi laughed. "Maybe I went too hard on you? Think of it as tough love."

Another minute; just one more minute. He counted the

squares on the checkered floor. His gaze strayed to Alice again.

"Enough of this!"

He got to his feet and got started on the preparations to leave. First of all, this stupidly heavy cloak had to go, along with the rest of the outfit. As dramatic as the whole thing was, it really wouldn't fit in the story he was taking part in (for the time being, at least). On the other hand, the white getup felt strangely familiar as he slipped it on. Kokichi patted down his hair.

"Goodbye to my weak self, I'm leaving now," he announced to his sleeping double. Kokichi tapped the mirror. "I have a game to win. Wish me luck, okay?"

Well, that was it then.

Kokichi opened the door and walked past the threshold.

He had a killing game to destroy.

CHARACTER PROFILES

KOKICHI OUMA:
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HIMARI KANEKO:
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MEGUMI KOGANE:
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NAME Kokichi Ouma (pre-game)

ROLE Alice

PERSONALITY

A polite boy with a goody two-shoes streak to him. Because he has a reputation for being a good kid, he uses it to his advantage, so he can either get away with doing something wrong or get favors from others. Though he rarely shows it, he's stubborn and often gets angry when contradicted. Wears his heart on his sleeve and doesn't like it.

Design by Overine19 ▶

@overine19

NAME Himari Kaneko

ROLE Cheshire Cat

PERSONALITY

Kid with a young lady attitude. She's selfish and capricious. Himari doesn't like to help others; she enjoys toying with them a lot more. When circumstances force her to be cooperative, she still isn't of much help: because she's unused to offering assistance, she doesn't know what that entails. She ends up being cryptic or rude even then.

Design by skypple ▶

@carn.e.vil

@skyppl-e

@carn_e_vil

NAME Megumi Kogane

ROLE White Rabbit

PERSONALITY

A bit of an airhead, Megumi often has her mind in the clouds. Although she owns many watches, she gets distracted and misses her appointments anyway, hence why she's always late. Though she's a nice person to talk to, she's very nervous around strangers; she resorts to running away to avoid conversations.

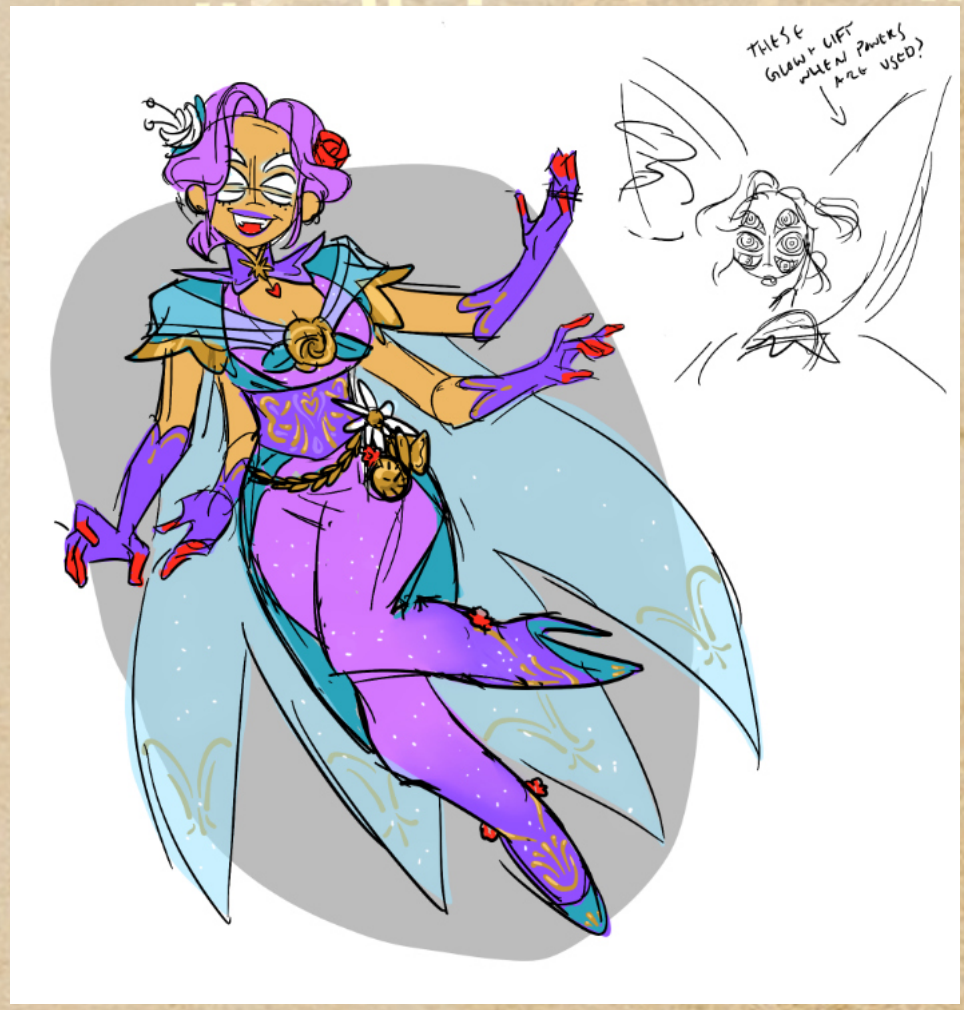
Design by ren ▶

NAME Mayumi Mizuho

ROLE Caterpillar

PERSONALITY

A very wise person; knows everything there is to know about Wonderland. However, she only shares her information if given something in return. To get her to speak, one must offer her a secret. Otherwise, she'll ignore the question and talk in circles until whoever is bothering her goes away.



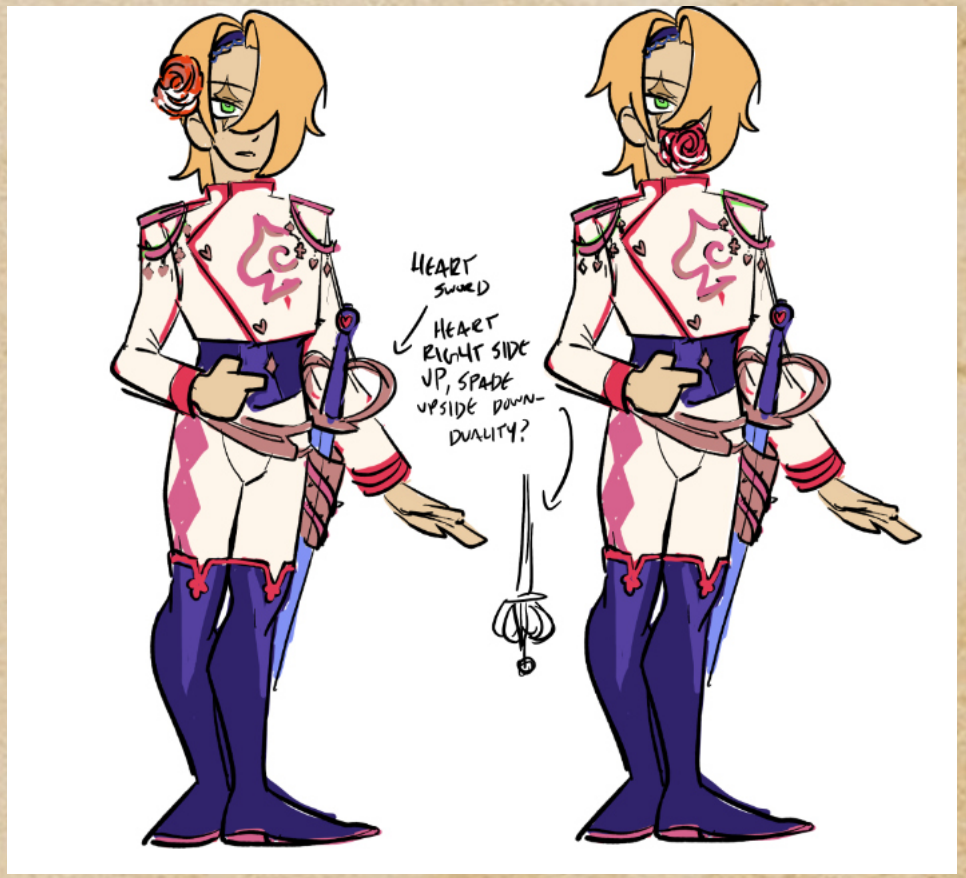
▶ Design by ren

NAME Tsubasa Hidaka

ROLE Card Soldier

PERSONALITY

He doesn't speak much, if at all. He's referred to as the Red Queen's shadow, since he's always following him in silence. Tsubasa is very protective of the Queen, and easy to provoke because of that. If he hears someone speak of the Queen, he's very quick to drag them to a trial. He's the Queen's last line of defense.



▶ Design by ren

NAME Ryuu Katsura

ROLE Tweedledee

PERSONALITY

The cheerful sibling. Talks a lot and without pause. Lacks consideration for others, so he might come off as rude. He always has a lot on his mind, but no filter. He gets himself into awkward situations very often, although he doesn't realize it. He's the heart of the duo.

▶ Design by Celchuno

NAME Daisuke Hasumi

ROLE Tweedledum

PERSONALITY

The grumpy sibling. Goes along with his brother's antics, but besides that doesn't get along with anyone. He's good at reading people and can see when Ryuu has offended someone, but chooses to annoy them further on purpose. He's the mind of the duo.

▶ Design by Celchuno

NAME Youta Hyodo

ROLE Dormouse

PERSONALITY

Youta will only talk about things in his scope of interest. If prompted to talk about anything else, he will fall asleep on the spot. Somehow, he still absorbs what's being said while he sleeps. However, he has no sense of timing for conversation, and will pick up on a topic that was brought up several minutes ago as if nothing has changed.

Design by Celchuno ▶

NAME Daichi Kubo

ROLE Mad Hatter

PERSONALITY

He has an exuberant kind of charm, and he always addresses an imaginary audience when he speaks. Every time he talks, it's like he's running a show all by himself. Because of this, he has a penchant for dramatics, often pulling tricks to entertain others.

Design by ren ▶

NAME Reo Shirogane

ROLE March Hare

PERSONALITY

A pessimist who is sure everything is doomed from the start, and doesn't hold back on stating as much. Being around him can be a real hit to anyone's good mood. Although Reo looks and acts serious, as soon as someone disagrees with him, he bursts into tears. He doesn't react to his own tears: he simply stands there as they stream down his face.

Design by skypple ▶
@carn.e.vil
@skyppl-e
@carn_e_vil

NAME Kokichi Ouma (in-game)

ROLE Red Queen

PERSONALITY

Same as canon, sillies.

Design by Overine19 ▶

@overine19

Concept Designs.

▶ Designs and Art by ren

Alice Concept 1 (left)

White Rabbit Concept Design (right)

▶ Mad Hatter Concept Design

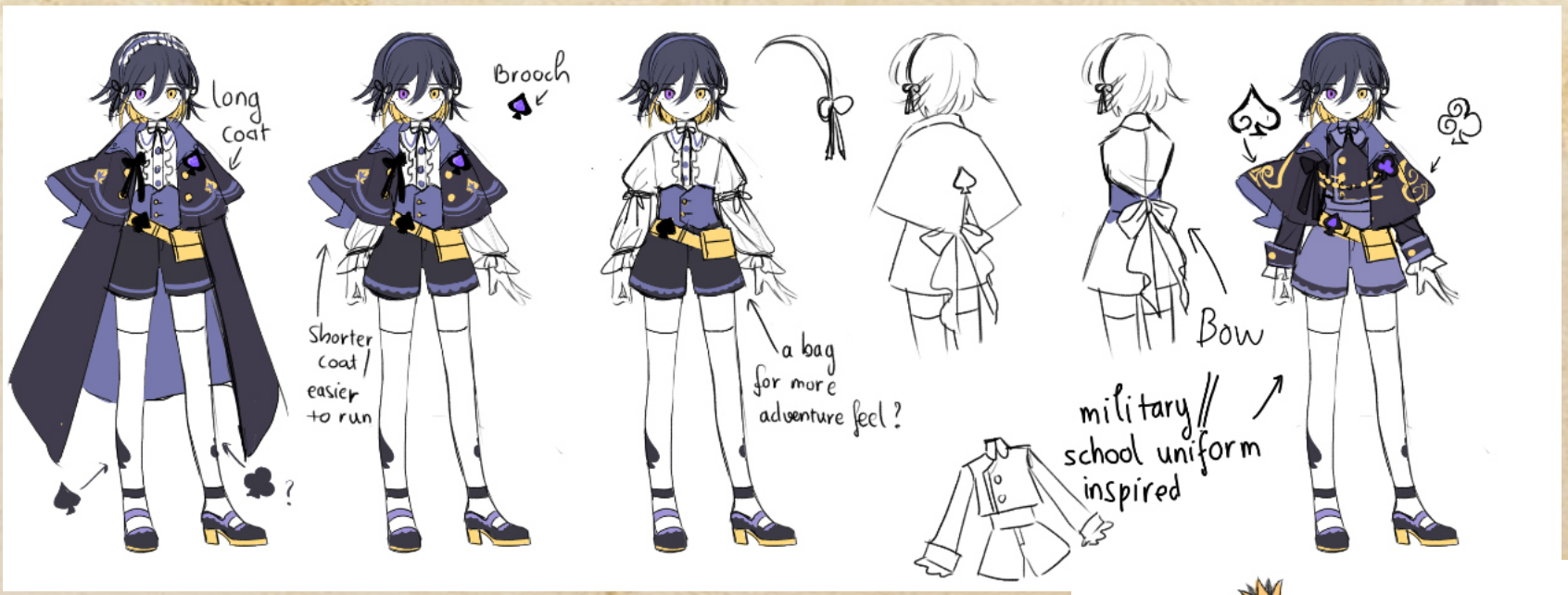
▶ Caterpillar Original Concepts

▶ Design and Art by skypple

Cheshire Cat Concept Art

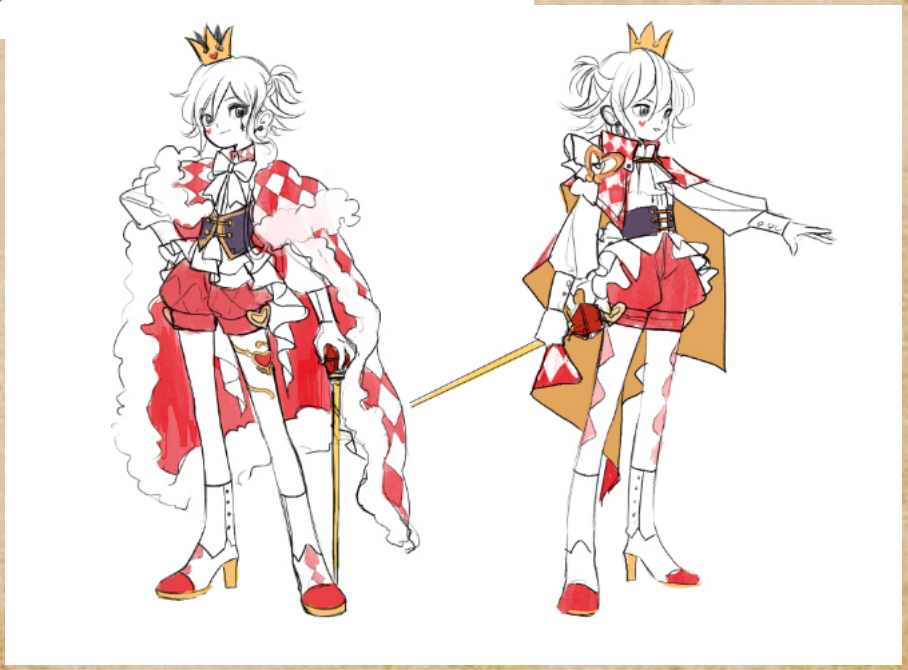
▼ Designs and Art by Celchuno

Alternate Color Palette for the Twins



▶ Designs and Art by Overine19

Alice Concept 2 (inspired by ren's concept 1)



Red Queen Concept Designs ▶

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Story Plotting.

Alice (pre-game) is fighting the Red Queen (in-game) for the right to rule over Wonderland. To make it to the Queen, Alice has to make it across the board, and become a queen himself. Only then can Alice face the Red Queen one last time to achieve victory. Each square on the board is a different place (the board is literally huge, so just imagine a kingdom where each section of it is inside one square of the chess board). Alice has to face a bunch of "trials" to get to the Queen, and each dice member is a prominent figure of the spot Alice moves to.

The more Alice progresses the more dream-like, weird, distorted the place gets, as “Wonderland” is supposed to be pre-game Kokichi fighting the flashback light's influence, so the distortion means he's running out of time and the flashback light is "taking over him" like a virus. Also, Alice starts sounding more and more like in-game Kokichi.

Alice eventually makes it up to the Queen, who's in his castle. The two have a confrontation where Alice loses to the Queen, and then falls into slumber, while the Queen explains to him his resolve was weak, and so it is the Queen's turn to play the game.

Names are really important in this scenario. Alice actually refers to himself as Kokichi at the very beginning, but decides against going with his real name. Every time Alice wins a trial, he earns the real name of the D.I.C.E. members. Of course, he and the Queen have the same name. The whole schtick with the two of them is that Alice has been fighting a losing battle from the moment he recognized himself as Kokichi at the beginning, because that's a fictional name that exists only in Danganronpa. And, the more he immersed himself in Wonderland (knowing the D.I.C.E. members as people, rather than characters), the more he lost himself.

The only way for Alice to win would've been to have rejected Wonderland from the very beginning, rather than play by its rules (which is a parallel to what Kokichi does in game).

Story Outlining.

Alice arrives at Wonderland. The one who greets him is the Red Queen, who invites Alice to play a game of chess. He says Alice can become a Queen himself and win against the Red Queen if only he can reach the other side of the board, then enter the castle to face him. (The Card Soldier is present, but he doesn't say anything in this scene)

The Queen then asks the White Rabbit to teach Alice the rules of the game. Before the Queen leaves, he asks for Alice's name (who calls himself Alice for the first time here). The Queen tells him not to forget who he is.

The White Rabbit explains what Alice will be doing from now on, and assigns herself as his guide, though she's rarely any help due to her personality. Whenever Alice moves from one square to the next, the White Rabbit "coincidentally" appears to guide him and give advice.

Every time Alice lands on a square, he can't move until he has won over the pieces that "rule" over it. Tall gates surround him on all sides and won't open until his victory.

First, Alice arrives at the tea party. There he meets the Mad Hatter, the March Hare and the Dormouse. Alice has no idea what winning entails, and he gets frustrated from all the

talking in circles, so he stomps away in a huff.

Alice walks all the way to the gates and tries to climb over them, but he falls and hurts his knees. The Cheshire Cat appears at the top of the gate and laughs at him, saying he suffered a great fall. Kokichi asks for her help, but Cheshire refuses and soon disappears.

Alice wanders aimlessly for a while until he catches a glimpse of the White Rabbit and runs after her. Once he catches up, Alice demands the White Rabbit explain what he's supposed to do.

The White Rabbit tells him that, in Wonderland, someone's name is very precious. To win against a piece, you must steal it from them. She also says their names should be engraved somewhere in their clothing or accessories. Alice doesn't know how he's supposed to steal that from them. After some pondering, the White Rabbit decides that giving him the means to do it doesn't hurt, so she gives him a flask of sleeping medicine.

Alice returns to the tea party and claims the liquid is something that'll make the tea more delicious. After everyone falls asleep, he steals their names. The gates open, but Alice

chooses to wait until the drug wears off to make sure everyone is okay.

Hours pass, but they don't wake up. Alice doesn't have the courage to feel their pulse/breathing. He runs to the gates so he can move to the next square. When the White Rabbit shows up, Alice asks if everyone will be alright. The White Rabbit then says she forgot to warn him that a piece that has lost ceases to exist. She also tells him this is the only way to win. Alice is hesitant and tells her he'll find another way to win, to which the White Rabbit simply smiles.

Alice progresses to the next square. Here, she meets the twins, Tweedledee and Tweedledum. The two, especially Tweedledee, keep bothering him to play games, but Alice isn't in the mood for entertaining them. For the most part, he just ignores the twins. He walks up to the gates, and Cheshires appears again, this time from the other side of the gate. Because Alice is in a bad mood, Cheshire actually gives advice. However, it's cryptic and unhelpful. He pretends she helps, guessing keeping Cheshire in a good mood will help him later.

Just then, the twins catch up to him and Cheshire disappears. Alice is roped into going along with their games; he holds onto hope that winning against them in trivial games will count. However, no matter how many times they play and

Alice wins, the gates remain closed. Alice starts to get desperate, telling himself to *think*. At the end, he surrenders to the rules.

Alice suggests they play a dart game: if he can pin both brothers to the tree, he wins. Tweedledum doesn't want to, but Tweedledee thinks that's a funny game and agrees. Alice plays with Tweedledee first. Once he's sufficiently pinned, he turns to Tweedledum, and gets him to play by informing that he'll continue to play with Tweedledee if Tweedledum doesn't do it. Alice steals both their names once they're pinned.

After, Alice wanders for a while but can't see anything or anyone. Then, he reaches a train station, where he finds the White Rabbit again. They take the train together, and there's no one else but them inside. They talk for a bit until Alice gets to the next square, where he finds Cheshire.

Cheshire attributes Alice's previous victory to herself and her advice. Alice continues to play along, realizing that he won't be able to take Cheshire's name otherwise. The entire time, he pretends to be her friend, and by making casual conversation, gets Cheshire to show where her name is. Then, they play tag together, though Alice is quietly waiting for an opportunity to take Cheshire's name.

Eventually Alice is cornered in a high place, and he sees his chances. When Cheshire jumps to catch him, he steps to the side then catches Cheshire, "saving" her from falling. Cheshire thinks Alice is giving her a hand, but instead Alice uses gravity to rip Cheshire's name off of her, letting her fall in the process.

Alice watches Cheshire for a while, like he expects her to move again. As he's zoning out, the White Rabbit appears, whistling and commenting that that was a pretty nasty fall. The words snap Alice out of his daze, but it also brings him to a breaking point. Alice fires question after question at the White Rabbit, getting angrier with each inquiry. The White Rabbit dismisses all of it by saying she doesn't know anything about all that complicated stuff, but she knows someone who might. Alice asks what she means, but at that moment the White Rabbit claims she's late and runs away.

Following the White Rabbit, Alice moves to the next square: it's a dense forest where there doesn't seem to be anyone. Irritated, Alice says loudly that he'd like to get this over with. At that moment, the Caterpillar shows herself and calls Alice impatient and undisciplined. She also claims that it's that impulsiveness that got him in this situation to begin with.

Alice is getting quite fed up with talking in circles, so he demands to know how to get to the castle, since the forest

loops around no matter what path he takes. The Caterpillar says she has no problem with leading him to the right path, but he'll have to offer her a secret in exchange. Alice thinks for a moment, then figures since names mean so much in this place, revealing his own would be enough. However, the Caterpillar already knows his name, and when asked, she explains that Alice has the same name as the Red Queen. If Alice wants to get to the castle, he'll have to offer a much more important secret.

Alice can't think of anything else, so the Caterpillar provokes him by asking if Alice knows himself so little that he would have no secrets to share. After a few more remarks of the same nature, Alice grows desperate because he can't move forward like this, and the Caterpillar won't be so easily fooled like the others. He goes on a rant, asking why he needs to win so badly, why can't he just go to the Queen. Then, Alice says this game isn't even interesting, so there's no point in it (sounding a lot like in-game Kokichi).

As he runs out of steam, Alice stares blankly at his own hands and wonders when he had started caring about something like that. The Caterpillar asks if Alice has always acted this way, if this is his true personality. Alice sees nothing wrong with his own behavior and says he's himself, who else

could he be? The Caterpillar smiles and tells him she has learned something valuable, and for that reason she lets him pass.

When the Caterpillar gives him her name, the forest decays and dies, opening a path Alice hadn't seen before. Alice can't parse out what interested the Caterpillar, and he keeps thinking about it all the way to the Castle entrance.

However, Alice can't go up yet. Guarding the entrance, the Card Soldier waits for him, and refuses to let Alice pass. He promises that, even if the Queen and Alice bear the same face, he won't be merciful towards Alice. Being unprepared for hand-to-hand combat and without a weapon, Alice is easily outmatched. This is the first time he realizes he might actually die. While desperately dodging, Alice thinks over and over "I don't want to die".

He can't keep running forever, and soon the Card Soldier has him cornered. As the sword swings down, Alice yells out that he doesn't want to die here, with tears in his eyes. That's enough for the Card Soldier to falter, as he can't bring himself to attack someone with the same face as the Queen. However, that moment of hesitation is fatal.

Alice sees his chances to strike the sword out of the Card

Soldier's hand. Both run to the sword, but Alice reaches it first. As he holds the weapon, the Card Soldier falls mid-step. Confused, Alice inspects the sword, and finds that there's a name carved onto the pummel. Taking the sword grants him an unexpected win.

In the heat of the moment, Alice intends to throw the sword away but the White Rabbit appears and tells him the sword is his, as per the rules of the games. She also reminds him he'll need the sword to fight the Red Queen. Although reluctant, Alice does as instructed.

Finally, he asks the White Rabbit if she's here to stop him, but the White Rabbit explains that it's quite the contrary. She is, after all, his guide. Her role is to lead him exactly where he needs to be. The White Rabbit says he did well in getting so far, and for reaching the opposite side of the board, he can be queened (promoted from pawn to queen). The White Rabbit takes off Alice's headband, gently fixes his hair, and places the crown on his head. She then asks if Alice accepts the crown, to which Alice says yes. Her body falls forward, but Alice catches her and carefully sets the White Rabbit down before entering the castle.

Alice doesn't go up to the Queen right away. He sits at the staircase and takes a moment to breathe. He goes through the

items/names he stole, then finds his resolve to fight the Queen. He already hurt too many people to get here, so the least he could do is win so it won't be all in vain.

The Queen is sitting at the throne and cheerfully greets Alice when he walks in, congratulating him on his queening. Then, he asks Alice who he is. Alice isn't in the mood for talking and doesn't reply, but the Queen keeps poking at him, even as they fight (though it isn't much of a battle, since the Queen is only defending and letting Alice do whatever he wants). After being riled up, Alice becomes more aggressive, which only makes the Red Queen laugh. The Queen repeats his question just as Alice trips him up, and Alice tells him with confidence that he's Kokichi Ouma. This means checkmate.

The Queen strikes Alice before he can do it first. Alice stumbles and shakily asks why. The Queen tells him that Kokichi is *his* name, and that he had warned Alice that he should remember who he is. But he got too immersed in the game and became someone else, so he would've never won against the Queen. Alice asks why he did all this, then. The Queen says it was to prove his resolve; to prove that he could win while being himself. However, because he played by the rules, Alice set himself up for failure. Then, he "comforts" Alice by saying it was not his fault, after all, the entirety of

Wonderland was against him, and the game was never fair to begin with.

"This is why you should never play by the rules, you know?"

Alice loses consciousness and the Queen lifts him and puts him to rest inside the mirror. The Queen watches Alice for a moment, a somber look on his face. Then, he shrugs and chuckles. He sets out to get ready, changing his clothes to Kokichi's in-game outfit.

"Goodbye to my weak self, I'm leaving now. I have a game to win. Wish me luck, okay?"

White Rabbit

"What were you running for?"

The White Rabbit puts a hand under her chin and hums, thinking for so long she runs out of breath and has to take a deep breath before returning to the thoughtful noise. Finally, her eyes light up in realization. Alice leans forward in expectation.

"I don't know!"

"You don't *know?!*" Alice hisses.

He can't quite hold back his frustration, voice raised a few octaves. The White Rabbit jumped. She has a look of shame on her face as she plays with one of her ears.

"I forgot."

"You said you had something to show me!"

"Oh! Oh, that's right! Follow me. This time, I won't forget the way. I won't get us lost, either. I promise," she says all in one breath, stumbling over her words to get them out before the air in her lungs is gone.

"We're *lost?*" Alice shrieks.

The White Rabbit waves her hands frantically. "No, no! Not at all." She looks around. She points in a random direction. "I recognize that tree."

Alice stares. There's no tree there, only a solitary bush and some butterflies. He bites his tongue hard enough to hold the anger down.

"We're lost," the White Rabbit admits.

Caterpillar

"Kokichi," Alice whispers. He's sure he looks shifty, with his eyes darting in every direction, a hand cupped around his mouth.

The caterpillar, however, is eager to lean forward atop her mushroom, eyebrows raised as if that would help her hear better. When Alice fails to speak again, the Caterpillar crosses her upper arms, while the other two rest at her hips.

"If your desire is to share, then you must speak with all your chest." She presses her smoking pipe under his chin, covering Alice's face in smoke. "Unless, of course, that was never your intention to begin with."

Alice steps away and coughs into his fist. He frowns, but holds back a reprimand.

"I was trying to tell you--"

"Your name, yes?"

The Caterpillar smiles in the face of his surprise. She takes a long drag from her pipe, finally releasing the smoke in the shape of the letters of his real name. Alice, although impressed by the tricks, tenses at the sight. He grips at his own elbow hard enough to center his thoughts.

"May I ask how you know that?

"You already asked, did you not?" The caterpillar chuckles. Her eyes open wide as her wings flutter open. She peers into Alice like she knows everything there is to know about him. "I am acquainted with that name, after all."

"From who?"

"The Queen, of course." She inclined her head. "But you'll have to tell me a lot more than your name if you wish to learn the meaning of this information."

Card Soldier

The tip of the spear on his throat is cold. Alice doesn't dare move a single muscle, not even to breathe. He glances at the Queen, standing a couple steps behind his guard. The look on his face is hard to decipher, but Alice thinks he sees him smirk as he turns away in a flurry of long cape and ruffles.

Alice has no time to consider following after him: as soon as the thought crosses his head, the spear pokes harder at his skin. It's not enough to draw blood, but it's close.

"I don't suppose you'd let me pass," Alice deadpanned.

The guard doesn't change positions, as still as stone even when Alice speaks. Carefully, Alice takes one step back, then another. When the guard makes no move to stop him, he finally breathes out a relieved sigh. Alice rubs his neck, glad to find no injuries there.

"I'm sorry to inform you, but your journey ends here," the guard states. His body blocks the only entrance to the Queen's castle. "By order of His Majesty, the Queen, I order you to leave."

"Do you really?"

The guard doesn't react. If he's confused, only the tick at the corner of his mouth is any indication. Alice folds his hands behind his back and smiles kindly.

"Do you really feel sorry?"

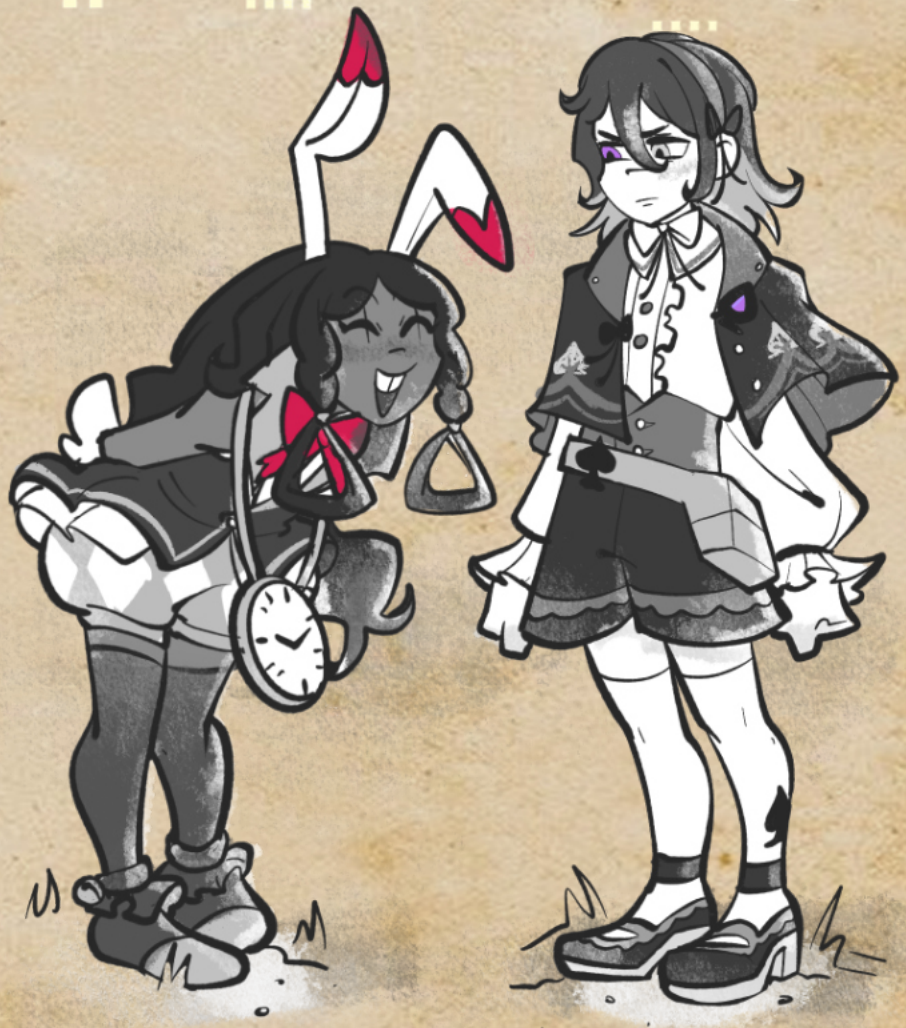
The guard falters; he shifts his eyes to the side, his lips press into an even tighter line. His fingers move along his spear and, for a moment, Alice thinks he might get attacked again.

"That is irrelevant."

"Ah, empty formalities. I understand."

With each word out of his mouth, the more uncertain the guard is. He is fully fidgeting now--a sick part of Alice is glad to watch him squirm.

Illustrations.



Alice

ROLL THE DICE

THANK YOU for supporting THE CROWNING OF ALICE.

This mini zine is a bonus PDF created by some of the contributors of our main zine, Roll the DICE!, a Danganronpa zine centered on D.I.C.E.. We hope you enjoyed the hard work and love from our creators!

Fin.